神様のメモ帳2
杉井 光
イラスト❊岸田メル
電撃文庫

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 02

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春休みのある日、NEET探偵事務所に駆け込んできた依頼主は、変にテンションの高いタイ人の女の子だった。
失踪した彼女の父親が残したバッグに入っていたのは、二億円もの大金。
彼女の依頼は、「お父さんを、助けて」
ひきこもりパジャマ少女の〈ニート探偵〉ことアリスと、その助手である僕は、ニート探偵団のテツ先輩、少佐、ヒロさんの力も借りて調査を始める。街の不良を束ねる四代目まで巻き込んでやがて事件は思わぬ方向へと転がり始めるが――
情けなくておかしくて、だけどほんの少し勇気がでる、青春ニートティーン・ストーリー第2弾。

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杉井 光

1978年、東京生まれ。そのくせ電車の混雑が苦手で埼玉にすら自転車で行くことがしばしば。電車通勤していた時期は自分でもどうやって我慢していたのやら。あ、夜勤だからラッシュなかったっけ。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女
火目の巫女 巻ノ二
火目の巫女 巻ノ三
神様のメモ帳
神様のメモ帳2

イラスト：岸田メル

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは http://maigo.jp/

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神様のメモ帳2

杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル

藤島鳴海

Narumi Fujishima

去年までは、どこにでもいるただの高校生だった僕。
冬に起きたたいへんな事件のせいで、三学期は丸ごと潰れてしまった。
それでも奇蹟的に進級できたけど、あいかわらず授業にはちっともついていけないし、テストも赤点ばっかり。気づけば人生転落寸前の崖っぷち。

このまま無職まっしぐらになるわけにはいかず、一念発起して二つもアルバイトを始めた。
一つはラーメン屋の店員。もう一つは……探偵助手だ。
……バイト先の選択を間違えたかもしれない。そもそも雇い主の片方がニートだし。
その上、職場の近くにニートたちが常時たむろしていて、僕を引きずり込もうとするのだ。
どんな連中かというと——

アリス Alice

こいつは、ニート探偵。僕の雇い主その1だ。
部屋からほとんど外に出ないひきこもり。そのせいもあって人使いが荒い。
探偵助手（僕）のことは、ちょっと便利な喋る掃除機ぐらいにしか思っていない。
非力で生活能力ゼロのくせに口だけは達者だから、文句を言うと五千倍くらいになって返ってくる。
ほんと、なんでこんなやつの下で僕は働いてるんだろう。
自分でもよくわからないけど、でも僕がいないとこいつ飯もまともに食わないしな……。

ニート探偵団
NEET Detectives
アリスのもとには、彼女に負け劣らずの社会不適合者たちが集まっている。
どんな逆境でも、あきらめない・振り向かない・働かない、それがニート探偵団だ！やれやれ。
テツ
Tetsu
先輩
彼の通っている高校で、数年間に渡って伝説を作り続けた男。ビル清掃バイトでも、ボクシングで鍛えた超人的な動体視力で、ゴミトートの回収しかできないが、たまに拾い！にはなるんだけど、それ以外ではろくなことしないんだ。
少佐
The Major
こんなナリだけど、これでも大学生。飛び入りのミリタリーニアで、大学教授なみにヒロのメカニック情報を、通信や盗聴にしか使っていない。
ヒロさん
Hiro
とくにアニメ関連は、ネットレベルでは、その右に出るものがいない、と言われる。だれもが振り向くルックスも、男泣かせのような話術も、ナンパにしか使っていない。出ほうその人生が心配でいるので、いつか刺されるかもしれない。

ミンさん Min

探偵事務所と同じビルの一階でラーメン屋をやってるおねえさん。僕の雇い主その2。
僕のまわりでは数少ない、まっとうな社会人だ。世話になりまくっているので頭が上がらない。
喧嘩っ早い人なので、ラーメンがあんまり美味しくない、なんて怖くて言えない。

四代目 The Fourth

街中の不良ニート少年たちを束ねるヘッド。探偵団のみんなとは腐れ縁。
口は悪いし気も短いんだけど、面倒見はいいらしい。探偵団の連中よりずっとまとも。
手芸が趣味でプロ並みの腕だってことは、ばらしたら殺されそうなのでだれにも言えない。

Meo

メオ

ラーメン屋で僕が働き始めた日。いつものようにアリスにあごで使われながら、僕が自分の人生にちょっと疑問を抱きつつぼんやり過ごしていた土曜日の午後に、彼女はやってきた。タイで生まれ育ったという、変なテンションの女の子。なんと、探偵事務所に用があるという。

探偵助手の身ながら、僕は驚いてしまった。まさかほんとに依頼客が来ることがあるなんてね。

ニート探偵に調査を頼む程度なら、大した困りごとじゃないのだろう、と思ってしまった。

でも――

彼女の持っていたボストンバッグには、ぎっしりと濃いリアルが詰まっていた。
二億円。
それは、だれかの人生を狂わせてなお、お釣りが来るほどの金額だ。
メオは言った。「お父さんを、助けて」
そうして――事件は転がり始める。
僕らの思いもよらぬ、ひりついた暗闇の中へと。

デザイン❊鈴木 亨

One day in the spring holidays, a client suddenly appeared at the NEET Detective Agency, an odd Thai girl who was always unusually excited.

The bag that her father left behind after disappearing was filled with a hefty sum of money— two hundred million yen.

The girl's request was— "Please save my dad."

The young NEET detective, Alice, who wore pajamas and wouldn't take a step out of her room and I, as her assistant, borrowed the power of Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro of the NEET Detective Squad to start our investigation. Even the leader of the juvenile delinquents, Yondaime was dragged into it, the matter developed into an unexpected direction—

This is the second episode youthful NEET- Teen Story that was somewhat unbearable, somewhat funny but also with a hint of courage.

Narumi Fujishima

Until last year, I was still an ordinary high school student.

Due to the incidents that occurred during last winter, my whole third semester was ruined.

Even so, I still managed to advance to second year, just like a miracle, but I still couldn't follow what the teachers taught, and failed in almost all of my exams. When I finally came to my senses, my tragic life was already at the edge of a cliff.

I knew that I couldn't just become a useless bum, so I put in more effort and accepted two part time jobs.

One of them is a worker at a ramen shop, while the other is…… a detective's assistant.

……. It seems like I might have chosen the wrong place to have a part time job, and one of my employers is a NEET too.

Furthermore, NEETs walk all around at the place where I work, everyone trying to bully me into being a NEET.

As for who they are—

Alice

This girl is a NEET detective, and is one of my employers.

She's a hikikomori that almost never went out, so her way of ordering people around is quite impolite.

She thinks that a detective's assistant (me) is just a useful vacuum machine that can talk.

Being physically weak, she can't live by herself but she is good at arguing; whenever I complain even a bit, she immediately gives me a five thousand times scolding.

Really, why must I do things for this fellow?

Actually, I'm not really sure myself, but if I'm not at her side, she probably won't even eat her meals properly……

NEET Detective Squad

Surrounding Alice's side, the group of people at the boundary of society who would not lose to Alice.

No matter what difficulties they encountered, they still wouldn't give up, wouldn't turn back and wouldn't work; those are their principles. Sigh~ I really can't stand this.

Tetsu-senpai

He studied at my school a few years ago and dropped out, and is now an unbeatable pachinko master.

He learned boxing before and has acute vision like a superman but it is only used to bet on slot machines.

Although he's quite reliable sometimes, his view of money is absolutely terrible.

Major

Although he looked like that, he is definitely a university student, and an unbelievable military otaku.

Has programming skills that even university professors admire, but it is only used on wire tapping and taking photos secretly.

Hiro

Though he is often mistaken as a model, he's actually just a gigolo who stays at women's houses.

Has an appearance that makes people want to look twice at him and speaking skills that are like mellow wine, but they are only used to hit on girls.

He made many women cry for him before, and really might be stabbed somewhere some day.

Min-san

The boss that opened a ramen shop below the detective agency, my second employer.

She's one of the rare normal people around me. She kept taking care of me, so I really couldn't raise my head in front of her.

Her temper is quite terrible, so I'm somewhat afraid of her, and that's why I can't say that her ramen is actually not really good.

Yondaime

The leader of juvenile delinquents in the town, and has a deep connection with the people in the detective squad.

He's very foul-mouthed and impatient, but I've heard that he's very good at taking care of people, even better than the guys in the detective squad.

His hobby is sewing, and he has professional-level skill. I might be killed by him if I accidentally said that out, so I dare not mention it to anyone.

Meo

On the first day that I started to work at the ramen shop, I was ordered around by Alice as usual, and was having doubts about my life. On that boring Saturday afternoon, she appeared before me.

She's a girl who gets excited abnormally easily, and had lived in Thailand. Also, she even asked the detective agency for help.

Although I'm a detective's assistant, I was still taken aback…… I really didn't think that someone would actually have a request for

us.

I originally thought that it wouldn't be anything big since she looked for the NEET detective.

In the end—

She brought a Boston bag that was stuffed full of reality—

Two hundred million yen.

That amount of money could just mess up anyone's life.

Meo said: "Please save my dad."

And so— the matter started to develop.

Developing towards an unexpected, heartbreaking darkness.

Miracles can happen once to anyone, but when it happens, they never notice.

- from "My Name Is Shingo" by Kazuo Umezo.

Chapter 1

A small portion of people misunderstood that the twenty third district of Tokyo is just a city full of buildings from north to south, and I was one of them before I moved here. In reality, the only place where there are skyscrapers piercing the skies is the area near to the station, while flat, short houses surround the place. The asphalt road that was uneven because of the subsidence of the land, the smelly rivers that were emitting a pungent, sour odor, and the cultivated fields that I'm not sure if anyone is tending to and the high school that I'm going to, all of these are in a two kilometers radius of that area; but it was just separated by a street, the radiance of the neon lights couldn't be seen anymore.

Though Hanamaru Ramen Shop is also at a place five minutes from the station, it is also surrounded by broken down buildings, one of the shops that is shrouded in darkness. It is just a small shop that has only five tables in it, aside from the occasional drunken people going inside the shop at night, I almost never see anyone going into the shop in the daytime.

So my employment test was held on the thirty first of March in the spring holidays, at about one thirty in the afternoon when there was nobody in the shop.

"Listen, if even a little thing spills out, don't you even think that I'll pass you."

Min-san said while piling trays onto my hands; and bowls that were still puffing out white smoke were placed on the tray. She's the young owner of the Hanamaru Ramen Shop, with her long hair tied into a ponytail, wearing a T-back vest and showing her fit shoulders. White sarashi is used to bind her breasts. It really isn't hard to see that she went for body building classes, and is really not a person that a physically weak high school person can go against. But I still couldn't help but retort:

"Erm…… Why am I doing a thing like this for my employment test?"

"Don't you know how many bowls you've broken before!? You're just not concentrating enough! So if you can get all of these to Alice safely, I'll hire you."

I once helped the shop to do things like washing the dishes and serving them, I caused great losses at the same time. Actually, I should really thank the kind Min-san for giving me a chance by testing me.

“Ready, start. The time limit is five minutes.”

“There’s even a time limit!?”

Being glared at by Min-san, I could only carefully walk out from the kitchen backdoor.

Alice lives in the eighth room on the third floor of the same building in Hanamaru Ramen Shop. You could reach it after walking up the stairs and then going about five meters in the direction of the corridor, using not even one minute when going there from the shop on the first floor.

But at this moment, I used two seconds just to walk up a step, so my back was soaking wet when I reached the signboard with ‘NEET Detective Agency’ on it.

As both of my hands were holding trays, I could only press the doorbell with my elbow. Nobody answered, but only a blue light flashed.

“Alice, please, open the door for me.” I begged.

‘…… Just enter yourself. The door isn’t locked.’

The impatient voice of a young girl came from the other side of the intercom.

“I can’t use my hands, I’m holding two trays.”

‘You could just place them on the floor!’

“No, it would definitely fall down.”

‘What are you talking about? It’s just placing the tray on the floor, don’t you even know how to do such a simple thing?’

“There’s a tray on my head too!”

Hearing my tragic shout, the door finally opened. A young girl stuck her head out of the door. She had long, black hair that flowed to the ground, large eyes that could sparkle, and wore pajamas with

cute pictures of bears on it that showed her pale, sickly skin.

"…… Are you performing an acrobatic stunt?"

My hands were holding a tray each, and there was another on top of my head. Cooly looking at the trays that I was holding while trembling, Alice said in an annoyed voice:

"This scene is actually quite interesting. I feel like taking a commemorative photo of this and showing it to Tetsu, Major and the others. They would be delighted. I'll get my digital camera, and you just maintain your current posture."

"No, that's not important!" I frantically called Alice who was about to walk into the room: "Anyways…… Erm…… Can you please help me take it?"

I used my gaze to point at the shaky tray on top of my head, but Alice shrugged.

"Please think of the difference in height between you and I, and of my arms. Isn't that just impossible? Just walk into the room and find somewhere to place it! Remember to take off your shoes first. If you dare to spill anything, I'll have you in charge of cleaning the place until you wax the floor."

As usual, Alice was still being merciless.

I could only maintain the posture of my upper body, lightly take off my shoes, walk to the table in the small kitchen, place the trays on my hands on it and then lightly take down the tray on my head. I heaved such a huge sigh that my soul almost came out, and I felt like curling up on the chilly floor in this air-conditioned room.

"…… Ah, Master? Mnn, Narumi just came." The sounds of Alice and Min-san talking on the phone came from the room: "…… No, I don't think he spilled anything. You're so kind, Master. If it were me, I would just tell him to take buckets and not bowls."

This girl really does like to joke around. While complaining in my heart, I placed the three bowls on the same tray and served it to the bedroom.

Three walls in the room are covered with racks that are as tall as the ceiling, and some odd machines are placed on it, while countless wires tangled together around them. A large bed is placed

in the middle of the room, while teddy bears of various sizes and types are littered on the carpet; Alice sat in the middle of it, like she was surrounded by a sea of bears.

“You’re not asking me to eat all three, are you?”

Alice glared at the bowls that I served her. Not only is this pajamas-clad girl picky and have a tiny appetite, every time I have to put in a lot of effort so that she finishes all the food. A small amount of different-flavored ramen were placed in the three bowls.

“Perhaps Min-san thought that I would spill one or two.”

“Why didn’t you spill them? You’re even so slow that you wouldn’t notice when a praying mantis stops on your nose too!”

Why am I scolded even for this…..?

I pulled out the moveable table that was like the ones in a hospital ward, placed the tray onto it and pushed it in front of Alice:

“Just choose a bowl that you like, I’ll eat the other two.”

The pajamas-clad girl looked so closely at the bowls that her face almost fell into them, observing each bowl in detail.

“I would like the ramen to be lighter.”

She looked at me with a pleading expression.

“I heard that all of them are new creations, so I don’t know how’s the taste.”

“Ngh—”

After wavering for a long time, she finally chose the bowl with a clearer soup. But after she took a sip, she couldn’t say anything.

“What is it?”

“…… so sour.”

Sour? The ramen is sour?

Ah! When I think about it, Min-san is indeed making odd ramen these days.

“Uuu…… I’ve been tricked by the color of the soup. I’m too careless, there’s actually such a trap in it.”

Alice’s eyes were full of tears, but she still placed one noodle after another into her mouth.

“These two seems to be more normal, do you want to change?”

I held my portion of the ramen while sitting in front of the bed. But Alice glared fiercely at me with her tearful eyes:

“How could I trust a person who can eat the bowl of noodles as if nothing had happened!? I chose this bowl myself, so if I listened to your advice and changed it, but still don’t like it, wouldn’t I be in a bigger predicament? How would you compensate for my reservations then?”

I originally wanted to rebuke her: It’s just a bowl of ramen, nothing special, but after seeing Alice sucking in the noodles while going ‘Uuu— Uuu—‘, I really felt that she’s quite pitiful, so I shut my mouth. I speedily finished the two bowls of ramen and walked to the small kitchen.

Opening the door of the fridge, I saw that the fridge was full of 350ml red cans of Dr. Pepper. I took out one of them and handed it to Alice. Recently, I’ve learnt the subtleties of opening the can first before handing it to her. Alice snatched the can from me with trembling hands and drank it to the finish.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.”

Alice breathed out deeply, becoming relieved as if her brain had melted. She continued: “Narumi, get me another two cans .” and swung her empty can around. The eating habits of this pajamas clad girl are terrible, and she almost lived on Dr. Pepper. Being said that my sense of taste shouldn’t be tasted by a person who drank unhealthy drinks while eating ramen really is unpleasant.

“Humans can only live while supporting each other, I strongly feel I agree with this statement at this moment. Good thing you’re at my side.”

Alice said after finishing her ramen and her third can of Dr. Pepper, crawling into the mat while smiling at me. For such a sudden movement to happen, I was shocked and almost spilled the bowl with my elbow. Calm down. This fellow would always say these

meaningful things once in a while, and besides I haven't even been supported by Alice before. No…… Well, I can't really say that, but how should I say it?

"That's right, you said that you want to work at Hanamaru, so what brought you here today?"

Alice said, with her head sticking out of the mat.

"I can assure you that you're a person that lacks any wish to work from the day you were born, so you don't need to trouble Master just to prove this."

"I don't need these assurances." It's more like you're deciding on my life randomly. "I really think that Min-san has too much work, and it's more convenient for me to work here."

"Convenient?"

"Then I could come here almost every day."

Because of the case that Alice solved this winter, I'm now Alice's assistant. Although Alice is a detective, she's still a hikikomori who doesn't go out or meet society, and I've never seen other clients having any requests for her. So the job of an assistant is usually to help to carry food and Dr. Pepper, and also to be bullied by Alice. Compared with this, it might be better if I find some other place to work at, and wouldn't waste time so much.

"Hmph! I didn't even know that you were that passionate about your work as an assistant."

You're the one who told me to come everyday!

"Anyhow, not many people are willing to work at the ramen shop with such meager wages at this time, so it's a help to Master, at least. But as soon as Ayaka's out of the hospital, you'll get fired at once."

My hands that were collecting the bowls stopped.

As I was unable to immediately respond to the name that Alice mentioned suddenly, I gazed at the soup in the bowl and turned my head away to look at the bed.

"What's wrong? Aren't you just planning to work there until Ayaka

returns?”

“No…… Mnn, erm…… I’ve never thought about that before. Because……”

Ayaka.

She jumped down from the top of the school building at the start of this year, and is still lying on a bed in the hospital, in a coma. She’s my classmate, and also my only friend. It’s just that she wouldn’t talk right now, and couldn’t walk around.

Ayaka who’s like that…… would she still come back?

“The doctors said too that there’s still a chance, didn’t they? And weren’t you the first person to hear that?”

“It’s not wrong, but……”

I did some research myself too. If Ayaka’s current condition continued for three months and above, it would be called a continuous block of consciousness— people in a vegetative state. If the doctors deemed that there’s no chance of recovery, most hospitals would force their family to handle the necessary procedures for exiting the hospital. Although there were cases of recovery, most of them just recovered to the extent that they could use their facial expressions to convey their emotions, or use their mouth to eat food, that’s it.

If she could return to her normal life, THAT would be a miracle.

“You don’t believe that miracles can happen?”

“Alice, so you believe in them?”

“Of course. Miracles can happen once to anyone, it’s just that most people don’t notice it when it happens.”

I’m not sure who said that, but it’s a really stupid way of thinking. Telling me that miracles would never happen might make me feel better. If things go that way, doesn’t it mean that the miracle of Ayaka and I has already been used up during the time that we spent on the rooftop, and things couldn’t be turned back anymore?

“It doesn’t matter. Since it happened the first time, it would happen a second time. Believe it!” A woolen mat was on Alice’s shoulders,

and she smiled while hugging her knees. “ Rainfall in the Sahara Desert, the Golden Gate in the United States and the Taj Mahal in India, test tube babies that are given birth after their parents pass away, Jimmy Hendrix and the Tower of Babel, all of them are miracles, miracles and miracles! So there would be one day when all of mankind would become friends with each other.”

I still can’t understand what’s with Alice’s habit of using allusions, but I still forced out a smile to answer her.

“Our meeting is one, the fact that you are willing to come here is another, and even the fact that you didn’t spill any of the bowls and safely brought the bowls up here is one— all of them are miracles.”

“…… Well, wasn’t that smooth.”

I stood up. That’s right, since I’ve passed the employment test, I should hurry up and get to where Min-san is! I can start work from today.

As I was about to walk out of the room with the three bowls and trays, Alice halted me:

“Master said in the phone just now……”

“What did she say?”

“She said, you must put the bowls on your head when you’re going back too.”

“I’ve never heard about that!”

✻

Even so, saying that encountering other people is a miracle is quite a nice way of putting it. Especially to Alice, a hikikomori, while I’m about the same, as we would feel uncomfortable after speaking to a stranger for over twenty seconds.

The people who I've met in the past had some influence on me, more or less, and it’s because of this that I’ve not fallen to even lower depths right now. Though I didn’t become a decent person because of this, and I just lived groggily until my sixteenth year. In the wilderness that is filled with limitless possibilities, if I really

lived up till now because of meeting other people, then these flags in my life are really precious— although I don't really think that those are anything to be thankful for.

So the girl that I met right on the day when I started working after passing Hanamaru's employment test, would probably be a miracle too?

The girl appeared at about three in the afternoon, when I was melting pieces of chocolates using the double boiling method in the kitchen. Min-san stood further inside, and was using an electric blender to blend egg white and make meringue. The true selling point of Hanamaru is actually the ice cream that is even tastier than the one made by a professional dessert chef. The sweet smell that fills the whole shop caused the whole shop to become unlike a ramen shop, and there was nobody on the seats anyway.

And it might be because of this reason, the girl that kicked open the door while saying "Sorry for bothering you!" stared for awhile after seeing the scene in the shop. She seriously stared at the steel pan that was filled with chocolate for two seconds, and then took two steps back to reconfirm the portiere in front of the shop.

She was a striking girl who had coffee-colored skin. She looked about one or two years younger than me, and her hair that reached her chest was casually tied into two braids. White words were printed on the blue shirt that she wore, it seemed like words used by a minority race; while very, very short Denim pants were on the lower part of her body. The girl's legs were long and slim, if she said that she just swam past the Pacific Ocean to the Tokyo Bay, I might have really believed her. A coffee colored Boston bag was slung on her shoulder, and it felt somewhat uncoordinated on her.

When our gazes met, the girl clapped her hands together , said ‘Sawasdee’ and nodded her head slightly. I subconsciously answered her with the same sentence. Eh…… Where is she from?

The girl reconfirmed the words on the portiere hanging on the door and asked:

“Erm, are these words supposed to be read as ‘Hanamaru’?”

Her pronunciation of Japanese was quite accurate. But the question suddenly made me feel somewhat guilty, and I could only hide the steel pan filled with chocolate beside the sink and answer:

“Well…… Probably?”

“Probably!?” the Boston bag on her shoulder almost fell down. "Sorry, I’m not really good at reading kanji.”

Huh? Is there even a kanji on there?”

“Oh? Then how should you read this?”

The girl pointed at a corner of the portiere and asked.

“…… That’s a drawing of Naruto.”

“So you read this as ‘Naruto’ huh? Japanese is really deep……”

“Not really……”

“That’s odd, or did I just mistake the place? I’ve heard that it’s a shop owned by an understanding, beautiful big sister.” The expression on the girl’s face seemed troubled, and she looked around repeatedly.

“Mnn, then it’s probably not this shop. Min-san is not understanding at a— OUCH! That hurts!”

Min-san who walked out of the kitchen vigorously knocked on the back of my head.

“What are you doing, why did you lie to her?”

Min-san pushed me, who was hugging the bump on my head, away and put on her apron:

“Welcome. It’s still business time right now, so please have a seat!”

“Ah, sorry, I’m not here for ramen.”

And then the unbelievable words came out from her mouth.

“I’ve heard that there’s a detective agency above the ramen shop.”

Min-san and I looked at each other.

That was the first client of the NEET Detective Agency that I came into contact with.

✻

“It’s rare that we have a visitor. Narumi, give her a can of Dr. Pepper too.”

Although she never did offer me cans of Dr. Peppers (I don’t really want them, either) , Alice told me to give the girl a can. She kneeled on the mat, probably because she thought that it was courteous when dealing with visitors?

As she was about to step into the air conditioned office, the girl hesitated in front of the door because of the coldness of the room; while after she walked into the room and saw Alice’s appearance, she was so surprised that her jaw fell open, the Boston bag on her shoulder dropping onto the floor. What an easily read girl.

“…… You’re the detective?”

“I’m a NEET detective. I’m Alice, and my assistant standing there is Naru…… Uwaaa!”

The girl supported both of her hands on the bedside and stuck her face close to Alice. She observed Alice in detail in an extremely short distance, and seemed like she was sniffing the smell of Alice’s pajamas.

“Wh- What are you doing?”

“Can I hug you?”

“What nonsense are you talking about!?” Alice pushed the girl away with her whole face red and stepped back a few steps.

“Sorry, because I’ve never seen a detective like this, so……”

“So what? A client should behave like a client!”

“Can’t I? What about just a hug?”

“I’m not a doll!” Alice used the dolls nearby to build a wall and went back further to the direction of the bed.

“Really, Ayaka and Master are also like that, why do girls like to hug me so much? It’s so incomprehensible.”

No, I can understand why it’s like that. But I didn’t want to change the topic, so I didn’t speak.

“Hurry up and reveal your identity and the contents of your request. You aren’t here to play, are you?”

Alice said at the other side of the dolls while pouting.

“Ah, that’s right!” the girl shifted her elbows away from the side of the bed and said: “I’m Meo.”

When she was pronouncing her name, the tone of ‘Me’ was prolonged, while the end of the ‘o’ was closer to the tone of ‘u’, a pronunciation that isn’t present in Japanese. Next, she placed her hands on the two sides of her head and waved, just like the ears of an animal.

“Meo? Is that your name?” I couldn’t help but chip in.

“Yes, it means cat.”

“You’re from Thailand, right?” After Alice finished saying that, Meo’s eyes immediately widened:

“You know it? As expected from a detective.”

“It’s just Thai. What does that have to do with being a detective?”

“The way that Thai people gave names is so strange.”

Her name meant ‘cat’, is this a common thing in Thailand?

“Narumi, it’s called cheuulehn in Thai, and it means nickname. Most people in Thailand call people by their nicknames, because the names of some people are too long. Their culture doesn’t really care about names, and it’s said that hiding one’s true name could protect them from danger. As they didn’t want to be caught by the devil, they would intentionally give names of animals or arrange meaningless tones for a name.”

“So it can protect us from danger?” Meo said in surprise: “I didn’t even know that.”

…… Are you really a Thai?

“I came to Japan when I was about five, so I’m not too clear of things in Thailand.”

“Ah, so that’s why your Japanese is that good.”

“I learnt Japanese from my dad, and the big brothers who live in the same block as us. There are many ladies from Philippine and China there, but the big brothers there are mostly Japanese.”

“Mnn? You aren’t staying at the ‘Hello Palace’, are you?”

“Whoaaa, Miss Detective knows everything!”

Meo supported herself on the bedstead, her legs fidgeting non-stop.

“No, Hiro told me once before, he said that there’s a unique worker’s hostel there. What a small world this is.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of this detective agency from Hiro-san.”

Hearing Meo’s words, Alice and I looked at each other. So that’s how it is. Now we have some idea of what’s happening.

“A big sister from China live next to me, and Hiro lived there for a month or so too. It’s probably some time last summer? He taught me a lot of Japanese, and said that his job was difficult, and is called being a gigolo.”

“A gigolo is not an occupation!”

I unintentionally shouted out loud. Hiro is one of the NEETs who always hang out behind Hanamaru Ramen Shop, and is also a gigolo who always stays at women’s houses. What strange Japanese did he teach Meo?

“After that, Hiro was found by the security and was chased out. He told me when he left: If I have any problems, I could just ask for help at Hanamaru Ramen Shop.”

“So that’s how it is.” Alice sighed and shook her head: “Well, just ask Hiro to come over later, I have something to ask him. Anyhow, tell me about your problem first! That’s your reason for looking for me, right?”

After Alice finished speaking, Meo’s cheery expression suddenly clouded over.

“About noon, I received a phone call from dad.”

Meo sat in front of the bed and started to explain:

“He suddenly told me ‘Get the bag in the safe and look for a safe place to hide.’ I was really confused about the situation, but dad’s voice sounded really fierce, so I could only obediently listen to him……”

“This is the bag in the safe.” Meo pointed at the Boston bag at my foot and said.

“Mnn, it’s so heavy that it made me exhausted.”

“Did you try to contact your father?”

Meo’s expression clouded up even more:

“He told me not to contact his company, don’t go home temporarily, and then I couldn’t reach his phone anymore. Although he told me to hide, I didn’t really have any place to go to, so I remembered the detective agency that Hiro-san told me to go to.”

“What is your father’s name? What is his job?”

“His name is Kusakabe Masaya, he’s working at a company called Hello Corporation.”

Alice knotted her brows.

“I think Hiro mentioned this name before. He said that a yakuza man and his daughter lived next to him, probably those are you guys.”

“He’s not a yakuza anymore.”

…… not one anymore?

“I think he entered the gang when we were at Osaka, but he said that he got out of the gang already.”

A yakuza delinquent who exited his gang suddenly called his phone to hide, and to bring a big bag of luggage. This situation is unusual.

I looked at the Boston bag again— there wouldn’t be a bomb inside, would there?

“Have you seen what is inside?”

“No.”

“Then……” Alice lowered her voice, and shifted her foot from her bed to the floor. “If you don’t mind showing me, then please open the bag. But I need to tell you two, opening the bag is like pressing a switch, and you can’t turn back anymore.”

Meo and I looked at Alice at the same time. She still likes to suddenly say incomprehensible things that people don’t understand.

“…… A bomb wouldn’t be inside, would it?”

Meo and I asked at the same time. Alice’s lips curled upwards and shook her head:

“What do you think the thing that made the most people die in the world? It’s not a bomb or a poison, but information— the people who know must die. Even so, I still need to know what happened to your father before I could help you. If you are firm about this, then open it.”

It was as though I could hear the sound of Meo swallowing her saliva. The room was filled with an smell that was hard to describe — I really can’t differentiate the smell at that moment, was that the smell of danger? The smell of desire? Or is it what they call—

“Uu…….”

“Uwaa…….”

Meo and I made a shocked noise at the same time. There were countless Yukichi Fukuzawas staring at us from inside of the dark bag , and the bag was stuffed messily full of wads of cash. Although I knew that the atmosphere of money that was spread in the air was just an illusion, it was still the first time that I saw that much— probably about a hundred million in cash, so I couldn’t help but feel slightly drunk.

Meo’s mutterings broke the silence.

“…… Why is there so much money……”

“Is your family so wealthy that you have so much savings?”

“Our family is not rich!”

“Has this bag always been kept in the safe?”

After interrupting, I immediately realized that it was a stupid question. If the bag was always in the safe, how would Meo know about it? Meo closed her eyes, used her index finger to massage her temple, giving out a ‘Mnn—‘ sound and said after that:

“Sometimes, I would see dad bring the bag from his company….. Ah, I think it’s on each payday. I just felt: Wow, dad has so much wages! That’s so awesome.”

Who would have that much pay anyways!

“Alice, would this be the company’s money……”

“There is a possibility.”

A father who suddenly vanished told his daughter to hide with a hefty sum of cash, he’s probably hiding somewhere himself…… And this guy was once a yakuza too.

“That’s bad, should we call the police?”

I said lightly beside Alice’s year. Meo seemed to have heard my words, and walked slowly towards me while holding onto the bedstead.

“What do you mean? How’s my dad?”

“Nothing……” I couldn’t answer her for a moment, and stared at Alice.

“Your father might be involved in a crime.”

Hearing Alice’s words that were said in my stead, Meo’s expression suddenly froze.

“I think it’s better if we just tell the truth— your father might have cheated the company’s money, and ran away because his plan failed.”

“My dad would never do that!”

Meo forcefully pushed the dolls away and leapt onto the bed, grabbing Alice’s shoulders and shouting loudly.

“Please calm down, I’m just saying that there’s this possibility. Since

your father told you not to get near your house or the company, that means that he doesn't want anyone to know where you are, and there's no news about him either—"

Meo seemed to ignore Alice's words. She jumped down from the bed, grabbed the Boston bag and rushed to the entrance.

"Narumi!"

Not waiting for Alice's words, I rushed over and caught hold of Meo's shoulders. I, who was usually somewhat slow, could actually take action reflexively, I, myself was somewhat surprised too.

"Let go of me! Freak! Pervert! Old lecythus man! Machikane Fukukitaru! Nagoya chicken meat!"

Where on Earth did you learn these odd vocabularies? And you even pretended to be bad at Japanese ! Is it Hiro? Hiro must have taught them to her! And the ones she mentioned last aren't even used to scold people! Ouch! Blast, don't scratch me! Calm down! Stop fidgeting!

Although I was worried that the walls wouldn't filter noise perfectly due to them being too thin, but I still caught hold of Meo and shouted in her ears:

"CALM DOWN! You don't even know where your father is, so what can you do if you go out?"

"I'm going to look for him! My dad is not a thief!"

"What could you do even if—"

"Let go of me—"

Her shouts then (probably) changed to Thai, so I really couldn't understand what she said. In addition, she was struggling frantically, and really stretched me to my limits as I wasn't too strong.

"Meo, have you forgotten about what your father told you?"

Alice's loud voice came from behind us. Hearing her words, Meo froze instantly.

"Didn't he tell you to hide? I am sure that he's in some sort of trouble right now, and might even put your life into danger. If you

just rushed out, wouldn't that be a waste of your father's effort?"

"…… But!"

Meo twisted her body and escaped from my hand. I could tell that she was crying.

"It's best if you just called the police, better than you rushing around like a deer in headlights."

"…… Call the police?"

Meo's face clouded over.

"Don't call the police, dad told me not to call the police too. Those people always do mean things just because of the difference in skin color. The people in our building have permits too….."

Meo's tone suddenly became solemn, like she turned into another person.

"……. What happened?"

I tried to observe Meo's expression, but she only shook her head violently:

"Because dad was once a yakuza, so that's why he's being suspected, that must be why."

Suddenly hearing the cruel fact, I could only stay silent.

To people from south-east Asia, Japan is indeed not a country that they could live in comfortably. Take myself as an example, for instance, I've just heard that Meo's father was once a yakuza, and I immediately thought that he would steal his company's money. It's somewhat ill-conceived, but—

Don't call the police? Even telling her something like that, is there really something that couldn't be spoken of?

"That's why I have to look myself."

"You don't even know where he is—"

"Turn around and look over here. Shall I remind you who's the person in front of you right now?"

Alice suddenly said.

Looking back, Alice had got off her bed and was standing at the entrance of her bedroom, with her back to the light that was emitted by the countless monitors behind her.

Being interrupted while speaking, I heaved a small sigh, then left Meo leaning beside the table of the small kitchen. I couldn't say anything to Alice who had gotten off her bed.

"Miss Detective……"

"I'm not just an ordinary detective, but a NEET detective. Even if I stay huddled up in my bed, I can search through the whole world and find out about the real truth."

Meo kneeled on the floor, tearfully staring at Alice for awhile. Nobody spoke. Although I wanted to say something, I couldn't think of anything to say. Between a client an a detective, there's no room for a mere assistant to interfere— Alice was not looking at me, but her expression said just that.

"Can you find my dad?"

Meo's voice sounded like she was choking.

"Is that your request?"

Alice's tone of speaking was still as cool as a cucumber.

"If a NEET detectives accepts a case, he would search for the truth after going through three thousand worlds to look for an answer. If there's no request, I'm only one of the countless windows that couldn't speak."

Meo wiped away the tears in the corner of her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I'm giving you a request—" She said clearly: "Please save my father."

A relieved expression was shown on Alice's face, and I think I know why she felt like that. The hikikomori detective could only come in contact with the outside world through cases. If there's no official request, she could only save the information alone on her bed. Alice's loneliness, and her fear of being unable to help out with

anything although the world continues to change, I have heard of all of these during the incident last winter.

But—

I really couldn't stand aside without saying a thing.

"Are you really planning to solve this on your own without telling the police?"

Meo and Alice looked at me at the same time, but the first to answer was Alice:

"A detective must act according to his client's wishes."

While Meo just shook her head vigorously . I sighed again and scratche my head.

"So what if there's really a crime……."

"Dad is not a bad person."

Stop that, I get it already! But he could be involved in a crime even if he's not a bad guy! I just hope that Alice would not face something dangerous.

But Alice said coolly:

"I've already decided to accept the case, so there's no room for you to interfere."

A dizzy spell came upon me. This guy is serious, and doesn't even care that other people are worried about her.

"Think properly, why are you actually staying here?"

"……. Isn't it to serve food and Dr. Pepper for you?"

"If you really think that way, then you should hurry up and leave in my disdain."

That's what you said before! I wanted to say that but restrained myself. I sank into a temporary contemplation: No matter what, a detective's assistant exists just to aid a detective, and not to worry about the detective. Even so……

That made me think about the incident that occurred last winter. At

that time, I was to absorbed in my own thoughts and didn't notice, actually Alice and the others aren't just relying on the power of the police and were still doing dangerous jobs. Probably Alice, Tetsu-senpai and the others are already used to these dangerous things?

Ah— so that's why.

I'm not really worried of Alice. I'm just worried that I can't follow their footsteps. To be exact— I couldn't follow them at all. It's because I don't have knowledge, contacts or even talents.

Actually all of this doesn't mean anything, it's just that I'm cowardly.

"…… Sorry."

Meo looked upwards beside me with an uneasy expression while Alice looked coldly at me while sitting on the bed. Paranoia started to form in my heart, and it felt like they were trying to tell me, a pawn, to shut up. I could only hide behind the fridge, showing only half of my body.

"The- then……." I felt that aggrieved when I started to say: "If we're accepting the request, I have a condition."

"Why are you giving a condition?"

"No, it's because……" Alice's gaze was like the freezing wind on February, tearing people to shreds. "Since Meo's father wanted her to hide, what should she do after this?"

Meo shook her head non-shop: "I never thought about it." You should think about it first!

"It'll be troublesome if she rushed out like just now, so if we can't ensure Meo's safety, we can't accept the request."

Meo looked at me doubtfully, her eyes fluttering. Searching for an ex-yakuza would probably be hard, but if it's just looking for a safe place for a girl, I should be able to help with that. I looked guiltily at Alice's expression.

"Are you imagining despicably that you could just use Meo's safety as a shield on times of need, and then we can just give up on searching for Kusakabe Masaya?"

“Of course not!”

Well, maybe a bit…… Why is this fellow always so sharp?

“Forget about it, you’re not wrong. Meo, so it’s settled.”

“…… How is it settled?”

“You just say that you wish to be protected, or I’ll hand you to the police.”

“Wh- Why does this feel like a threat?”

“I’m not threatening you, this is a necessary precaution to look for your father. So now you have three choices. First, you can just go back. Second, call the police. Third, hand it to us.”

Meo stayed silent while hugging her Boston bag for a moment, then kneeled down and said:

“Please take care of useless ol’ me in the future!”

…… Where did she learn THAT? Really, who taught her these things? Was it Hiro? It’s Hiro, isn’t it?

“So— Narumi, you’ve started this, so hurry up and complete your mission?”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you say that we should hide Meo? There should be some empty rooms at Master’s place, so you go ask her!”

“Ask Min-san?”

Min-san lives at the ground floor of an apartment just behind her ramen shop. Since her father disappeared, she had some rooms empty. If we want to hide Meo, it would be suitable there. But…… Must I be the one to ask her?

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“Why didn’t you just call the police?”

Min-san didn't even look at me when she answered, but just continued to cut the celery in her hands. I didn't know what to answer her all of a sudden, and Meo stuck her head from the kitchen back door, an uneasy expression on her face. I turned around and looked at her, then stared at Min-san again.

"Well…… There are a lot of reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Ngh……"

I told Min-san about the disappearance of Min-san's father and him telling Meo to run away, but how could I tell her about the next part?

"You're expecting me to give her shelter without giving me a reason?"

When I think about it, it does seem like I'm asking for a mile when I just took an inch.

"Forget it, my dad's room is still collecting dust anyways, just sleep there for now."

…… Huh? She agreed just like that?

"Erm…… I might give you some trouble."

Meo's voice that was full of uneasiness came from my back. Min-san turned her head over only when she heard Meo's voice, and she said:

"Don't you mind, if there's any problem I'll beat up Narumi first. The room's a bit dirty, but you can use it as you like, as it's empty from the start anyways."

"She said that……" I turned my head over to look at Meo. Her face that had the color of coffee ole was immediately lit up with a smile.

"Thank you, Min-san."

"But you'll only get ramen for your meals. Narumi, get a blanket for her from the storeroom in my room."

"Ah, alright."

Thus, I brought Meo from the back of the kitchen to Min-san's house. Min-san ordered me quite naturally, and I didn't think much about it— but is it really okay for me to go in and out of a girl's room like this?

Min-san's father abandoned his daughter and the ramen shop and went missing until now, so his room is now being used as a storeroom, and it was stuffed full of bookracks and cardboard boxes that were once used to fill foodstuff. I randomly stacked together the cardboard boxes that were used to fill dried fish for soup, and finally managed to clear up some space so place the mattress. Meo stood in front of the door with her Boston bag slung on her back, curiously looking around the room and said:

"Is it really okay? It seems like someone is using the room."

"But you have nowhere else to go, right? And you can't go home too……"

Meo's expression turned gloomy, and I hurriedly continued:

"I'll go check out your home later. And Alice knows a lot of busybody oddballs, so don't worry!"

As I was about to leave Meo there and walk out of the room, She grabbed the sleeve of my shirt.

"…… Hmm? What is it?"

"Everyone is so kind, Min-san, Miss Detective and also Mr. Assistant……"

Kind? Me?

"I'm really sorry for just now, making trouble all of a sudden. So you were just worried of me…… Thank you."

I couldn't say a word for a moment. Actually I wasn't worried about Meo, so her direct gratitude made me feel somewhat flustered, not knowing what to say.

"I'm just feeling somewhat jealous. Hiro-san kept showing off to me, saying that he's a homeless gigolo, but he has Hanamaru. Because there's a beautiful and gentle Mother here, although she only knows how to cook ramen for him."

I really don't want a scary mother like Min-san…… the thought suddenly surfaced in my mind.

"Then what is your mother doing right now, Meo?"

Though it seems to be too late for this question, nobody asked this before anyways. Meo's expression suddenly froze. She lowered her head while sitting on the Boston bag on the floor, then raised her head to look at me.

"…… Mother…… she died due to an illness not long after she came to Japan."

I gasped. The strange thing is, the girl beside my foot smiled. Her smile was like fog on a summer morning, hiding a faint sorrow.

"It doesn't matter, I'm still living with the big sisters in the same building."

People look lonelier when they smile, that was what I learnt from the winter this year.

Though we might be able to find Kusakabe Masaya after calling the police, Meo might have to be all alone after this— I've only understood the fact at this moment.

But then, what should we do? I have no idea. If we really could locate Kusakabe Masaya, if he really did take part in a crime, what should Alice do?

As for me— what should I do?

"What's wrong, Mr. Assistant?" Meo looked up from below at me, who had shut my mouth and was not speaking. As I couldn't meet Meo's eyes, I turned my head to the other side and said:

"Nothing. Sorry for asking these strange questions."

✻

Not long after that, Hiro appeared at the ramen shop on about five in the evening.

"I've heard that Me-chan is here?"

The person who ran into the shop was a tall, nineteen year old man, and he wore a beige denim jacket and a pair of white silk khaki pants. I've never seen anyone more suited for wearing white clothes, including male artists. His appearance was like a model or a hustler, but he's actually just a NEET, and also a gigolo.

"Ah, Hiro-san!"

Meo, who was eating ice cream in the kitchen, poked her head out.

"So you've finished work?"

"Being a gigolo is a job that requires creativity, so our working time is more flexible."

"Hiro, get over here. I want to make you unable to embarrass the Japanese anymore!"

Min-san glared at Hiro while holding a kitchen knife, scaring him so much that he rushed out of the shop and hid in the alley behind the ramen shop. The back door of the Hanamaru Ramen Shop kitchen was located between two buildings. There, it was stacked full of worn out tires, large flipped over steel buckets, plastic buckets and wooden stands that were used as tables. It's the best place for the NEETs to gather.

Although it's the time when I should prepare for opening time of the shop, since there's nothing much to do, I walked out of the kitchen backdoor to look for Hiro; Meo followed me outside too , for some reason.

"Alice told me about the situation on the phone……" Hiro said while sitting on the plastic bucket. "But I'm still not sure about some parts of it."

I nodded.

"How much money is in the bag?"

Hiro looked at Meo who sat beside him.

"Hmm, I don't know. I didn't count……"

"Seeing as there's so much, I'd wager that there would be about a few hundred million yen." I answered for Meo.

"Is Me-chan that rich?"

Meo shook her head frantically.

“That’s true! The company isn't big, and you even live in the same area as the people who left home to look for a living.”

“I think it’s the money of their company?”

“Money of their company? Then how could he get out so much? And it’s cash, to boot!”

“This…… that is…… that……” I really don’t know how to answer. “Alice seemed to have found out something just now, that Meo’s father is one of the Directors of the company. If that’s true, then isn’t there a possibility?”

“…… Even if we say that he pocketed the company’s money, does the company even earn that much anyways? I remember that the financial status of the company isn’t really that good.”

“What does ‘pocketed’ mean?”

Meo’s expression was truly innocent, and caused Hiro and I to be unable to answer her for a moment. I could only choose a more suitable way of answering:

“Erm…… That means using his position to take away the company’s money.”

“You’re saying that again, Mr. Assistant! My dad would never do that!”

Meo kept hitting my arm with her face red. Hiro tried to be the peacemaker at this moment, and forcefully caught hold of Meo’s shoulders.

“Are you really sure that he wouldn’t do that?” he asked in a solemn tone.

“Absolutely.”

“Do you trust him that much?”

Medo nodded so vigorously that her neck almost snapped into half.

“Mnn, I get it.” Hiro’s voice regained its gentleness. “Trusting people is Me-chan’s job, doubting people would be our job. There are many things that we can’t be sure of if we don’t doubt it, so just

let us handle this nasty job!”

Hiro met Meo’s gaze for awhile, and then showed her a gentle smile.

Meo hesitated for awhile, then nodded.

This guy is really good— I suddenly felt that. To be frank, I wasn’t too sure about Hiro’s statement at that moment, but he always had a way to make people calm down. He probably always uses this talent on indecent things, right? He’s a public enemy for women.

“No matter what, we must still check out the condition of the company and Meo’s family.”

“Hiro probably knows the location of the building, right? And know the people there.”

“Ah— me? The security there already remembered my face, and I’ve already deleted the phone number of my ex-girlfriend.”

When I think about it, he had been chased out by the security. Then what should we do now?

Hiro stared at me silently.

Meo stared at me without saying a word too.

This is……

“Should…… I go?”

“There’s no choice, there’s nobody else.”

“I don’t mind going, but I’m currently at work.”

“What? At work?”

Hiro’s reaction was really too exaggerated, and really hurts my fragile heart. I tapped the words ‘Hanamaru’ printed on the black apron.

“Mnn, Narumi, you’re working here? Really? Why? Becoming a NEET isn’t an illness, so don’t mind it, you don’t need to force yourself to get therapy.”

I’m telling you I’m not a NEET!

“And you don’t even look like you’re working right now.”

Being said that, it made me speechless, because the truth is as Hiro have said.

“So what are Tetsu-senpai and Major doing right now?” I frantically changed the topic.

“I’ve just called Tetsu, he’s at the Tokyo Racetrack.”

Ah, to today is racing day. Since it’s the spring holidays right now, I even forgot what day it is today.

“He said that he lost the money used for taking the train on his last match, so he’s walking back. Really, he could just go bet at WINS, why does he need to specially run to that place that haven’t even started racing?”

The hopeless gambler…… Wouldn’t it take at least four hours for him to walk from there to here?

“I couldn’t find Major too, perhaps he’s playing a survival game?”

“Can’t I go after I finished work?”

“She works at night, so she’ll be out if you don’t go now.” Hiro said. I sighed. It’s like there’s a pair of invisible hands controlling me, not letting me work. I know, I know! I’ll go right now.

I walked back into the kitchen and asked lightly to Min-san who was concentrating on scooping out the dregs in the steaming pot.

“Erm……”

“You’re skipping work the first day at work? You really have some guts!”

Min-san said without even looking at me. Probably she heard our conversation just now.

“So- sorry, just pretend I didn—“

“There’s no difference, since we’re so free right now. But you’re fired if you’re not back by seven!”

Hiro lent me a jacket and a pair of cool glasses before I set off. Perhaps those have been given to him by his ex-girlfriend at that

building?

As I was about to bring my bike from the alley to the main road, I faintly heard the conversation between Min-san and Meo from the shop”

“Meo, would you like to work in my shop?”

“Eh, that won’t do, I’m working at a Thai restaurant right now…… Ah, but I’m on leave these days, so I might be fired…….”

“Just tell me if you change your mind, I’ll fire Narumi instantly.”

That’s just too much…… She’s so cruel. While suppressing my sorrowful feeling, I pedaled towards the road that was dyed red by the setting sun.

✻

Pedaling from the southern exit of the station towards the slope, I turned right after passing through the post office. I got lost between a middle school and an embassy, and went back and forth on the same road for quite a few times, then I realized that the four storey building that was about as big as the school building further to my left was a collection of residential rooms, which is also my destination – Hello Palace. I stopped at the roadside, staring blankly on my bike with my jaw open. I’ve heard that the people who live here are mostly women foreigners from south-east Asia, and thought that it’s just a broken down apartment with seven or eight people squeezed in a six tatami room. I actually had that kind of prejudice, how impolite of me.

So that I wouldn’t be noticed, I parked my bike at a corner of a building that couldn’t be seen from the guardroom.

When I stopped my bike, the large amount of cash that Meo brought suddenly surfaced in my mind. It’s too unusual, what if it really involved a crime? The police haven’t came to Meo’s house yet, have they? If so, I’ll just act dumb.

I took out the pair of glasses that was used for ornamental purposes and put it on.

The guards’ restroom was beside the entrance of the building, and

there was nobody in there. But for some reason I naturally started to walk on tiptoe, so what's the difference between me and a person who sneaks into other people's houses? I could only console myself that I'm not doing anything, and walked to the forth room of the third floor. The words 'Kusakabe' were written on the signboard. Not even a person could be seen there, and that made me a bit more relieved. I pressed the doorbell, waited for about three minutes but there wasn't any answer; so I turned the handle and found that the door was locked.

Actually, Meo handed me the keys to her house, but I really don't feel like going in. If I was spotted, I really couldn't explain why I have the key.

It couldn't be helped, I could only press the doorbell of the room next to it, the house of the person that Hiro once lived in. After about twenty seconds, the door opened a crack, and a young woman was standing behind it.

"Hi……"

She sounded rather sleepy. The lady wore a baggy T-shirt printed full of simplified characters and a pair of shorts, her long hair tied up messily with a rubber band. Although she didn't have any make up on, I could see that she was a Chinese beauty with a great figure.

"……. Who are you?"

"Ah, so- sorry!" Was she sleeping just now? "Do you know Kuwabara Hiroaki-san?

When I mentioned Hiro's name, the woman's eyes finally focused.

"Hiro? Eh? …… Ah, that jacket……"

"Erm…… Meo is at my place."

The woman's brows suddenly twitched, then speedily shut the door before I even finished speaking. After that, the sound of her removing the chains on the door came, and then this time, the door was opened wide.

"Ah— Mnn— I've heard about it, wait for awhile, I'll get it here."

Eh? Wa- Wait a sec, what's with this situation?

When I was supporting the door, the woman walked into the room and took out a coffee colored paper bag.

“You can eat this directly, but it’s even better after you heat it.”

With my brain in a muddle, the paper bag was stuffed roughly into my hands.

“Eh, ah, erm……”

I’m still not sure what was happening, but the girl hugged me all of a sudden. I immediately felt that she wasn’t wearing lingerie, causing me to freeze. At this moment, she said quietly in my ears:

“I can’t talk to you here, so just pretend you’re just here to get the bag, go home for now!”

I immediately came to my senses. The girl then let go of me, and said to me with a tone like a salesman: “Say hi to everyone for me!” then pushed me out and closed the door.

I was left alone in the corridor with the weight of the paper bag in my hands.

Can’t talk to me here?

Does that lady know of Meo’s current situation? But what did she mean by can’t talk to me here? Did she mean that there’s someone in her room, and it’s bad for our conversation to be overheard?

I couldn’t make head or tails of the matter from the start, but I still followed what she said, took the bag and left ‘Hello Palace’ obediently.

After walking out of the entrance, I immediately tore open the bag. There was a small bun in the bag, while a business card was placed on it— ‘Exotic Pub, Shanghai Love’. The logo on the card was a shining pink, while the name on it was a name written in romaji: Rin. There was also a sentence written below the name in an untidy scrawl—

Wait for me behind the shop at 4.00 am.

It was written on the card that the pub’s business time was until three thirty at night, so does that mean she’s asking me to wait until she finished work? But why did she use so much effort to act out

that play just now?

I placed the business card into my pocket, walked to my bike parked at the side of the road and suddenly felt a chill on my back.

I really shouldn't stop, and I should just ride my bike and leave ASAP; but I stopped walking because of that feeling. I saw two silhouettes from the corner of my eyes, and they were walking towards me from the direction of Hello Palace.

One of the men was wearing a grubby leather jacket, while the other wore a purple flowery shirt that had zero fashion sense, with curly hair on top of his head. I pretended not to notice and sped up. When I reached the shadow of the building, I felt the chill on my back again.

"Oi, you over there!"

One of the men shouted. Just like that, my intuition told me that these two are definitely not people to mess with. This is bad, I should really escape double quick. Just as I was about to ride away on my bike, the footsteps behind me quickened. I raised my head, only to see that the two men were horribly close to me.

"Kid, don't move!"

Almost reflexively, I raised my hands and threw the bag that I was holding to them, then hurriedly pushed my bike down the slope and jumped onto my bike. I don't know what happened with the bag, but I could hear the furious roars of the men coming from behind. I was afraid that they would quickly chase me down and grab my collar, so I accelerated the rate of my pedaling, rushing down the slope without even pedaling and sharply turned right as soon as I reached the road. A car flew by my side, leaving behind only the loud sound of the horn.

I steered clear of the main road and circled around the alleys that I didn't really know that well, and I only stopped and looked around after I reached the four line lane(?) .Of course, the two people are already gone. I gasped for breath, trying to slow down my breathing and my heartbeat, and I felt bouts of pain coming from my lungs.

Who are those two anyways?

The reason that I wanted to run away was not only because the men's actions gave me a bad premonition, the attitude of the

Chinese onee-san caused me to be suspicious as well.

I took out my phone.

"…… ah, it's me."

'How was it? Did you see Yi Ling?' Hiro asked.

"Erm….. Ah, yes, I did see her."

So that's why— her name is Yi Ling, that's why her nickname is Rin. While thinking of these meaningless things, I adjusted my breathing rate and answered:

"Meo's house is under surveillance."

Hiro, who was at the other side of the phone stayed silent.

"They might be yakuza. Hiro, you should really tell Meo not to go out."

'Got it. Things are really not that simple, we might need to ask for Yondaime's help……'

I told Hiro that I'm going back right now, and hung up.

We might need to ask for Yondaime's help. Although there's this possibility, I really don't wish for things to turn out like that. When the shonen yakuza leader of the juvenile delinquents start to take action, it would be hard to prevent bloodshed from occurring.

But my premonitions are the most accurate in these bad situations, and of course it's the same this time, too.

✻

The Hotel Street at four in the morning felt like an insomniac patient who couldn't sleep, its eyes swollen and bloodshot. Walking along the curved road on the slope, pillars of streetlights were towering over two sides of the road, illuminating the signboards with fee and service content written on it; the side view of a hotel that looked rather blurred due to the blue and pink rays of light shining on it was visible further up the slope.

Walking alone in this place at night, it felt like I would get crushed

by the psychological pressure soon, so I forced myself to focus on the fees written on each hotel. I'm not sure if it's because of the strong competition, there's a lot of mystifying side services. It looks like not only each hotel provided a microwave, Dreamcast was written on some of the signboards! What type of couples are they trying to attract, anyways?

I came here once before during that incident, but I don't really have much of an impression of it anymore. There really aren't much people at these places at this time, so it was extremely quiet.

Climbing onto the slope after walking out of the Hotel Street, I walked to an inconspicuous pub on the road. This place is away from the dazzling grandeur preferred by the young people, a street that exists for the sake of ojisans (probably).

According to Hiro, due to the special revision of the industrial law, the pubs on the streets have decreased, and have now almost disappeared or have changed to providing various services for the hostels nearby..

The pub that's like an endangered species, 'Exotic Pub, Shanghai Love', was just at the corner of the street. Having electric lights that are modeled on oil lamps and an arc-shaped door, it feels just like a pub that any grown man could go. The pink neon lights weren't too flashy , and it didn't feel like it's a suspicious shop. Is this really an indecent place? But the signboard says that it's a pub.

I looked at the time on my phone, the date had advanced a day, becoming the first of April. It's now three forty five in the morning, that's early.

A middle-aged man passed by my side, accompanied by a woman wearing a low-cut shirt, and it looks like she's occupational. Seeing the two walk to Hotel Street at the same time, I squeezed into the cramped alley beside the shop and hid.

Just at that moment, I remembered the scene when I returned to Hanamaru in the evening. I showed the card given to me by the Chinese onee-san— Yi Ling san, to Hiro and told him about what occurred. Hiro showed me an awkward expression and said: "I think it's better if I go. You probably won't be able to go out that late, right?" Maybe his experience of breaking up with Yi Ling-san wasn't too good?

Although I was worried that they would feel awkward if they met,

but the main reason that I went was that I wanted to go. If I need to trouble Hiro for such a simple matter, then I'm truly useless.

To be honest, sitting on the separator of the charged parking lot, I was somewhat regretting my decision to accept this request. What if I were caught by the police and to accept counseling? They'd probably inform the school, right? And I ran out without even telling my sister, what am I doing……

"Waited for a long time?"

Suddenly hearing the voice of a woman, it startled me so much that I nearly fell down. I raised my head to have a look, and I saw Yi Ling-san wearing an extremely short mini skirt that would be almost invisible in the morning streets and a light beige jacket. She bent down slightly and looked at my face:

"Sorry, are you okay? It's so late right now. I originally thought that Hiro would come."

"Hiro's because…… erm……"

"I know, he didn't want to come, right? Can you help me beat him up for me next time?"

Yi Ling-san said while smiling.

"It's not that convenient talking out here, I think it's better if we go to a restaurant."

She dragged my hand and started to go forward. All of her actions were overly natural. Though I still felt uneasy, I could only follow her obediently.

Then I slowly realized something— the way that Yi Ling-san was walking was somewhat unnatural. You won't notice if you don't look closely, but her back was a bit bent when she walked, and the steps that she took didn't match.

"Erm…… Are you sick? Or do you have a stomachache?"

"Eh? You can see that?" a wry smile was shown on her face. "Well, since I'm still the bread and butter of the shop, only my face wasn't beaten up."

"Huh……?"

“I’ve heard that you ran away, didn’t you? That wasn’t good— I even pretended that I knew you very well too, in the end I had to put in a lot of effort to explain, but they didn’t even believe me.”

“Er…… Were they the ones with the leather coat and the curly hair?”

“Correct. Those two are the racketeers of our shop, and they’re monitoring the building to see if Meo comes back.”

Racketeers?

“They’re yakuzas who collect protection rackets. I really don’t know what they would do, so remember to tell Meo, don’t come back here for the moment.”

They’re indeed yakuza. But why are yakuzas looking for Meo? When I wanted to continue asking, a voice suddenly came from my back:

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Who is this child?”

When I turned my head around, I saw two women who were dressed similarly to Yi Ling-san going past the buildings, and were walking to us.

In the restaurant during late night, at a the innermost table of the smoking area that didn’t have any other customers there, I was surrounded by three onee-sans who work at a pub, and I sat among them with my body curled up. Yi Ling-san asked while eating a large bowl of tekkadon: “So who are you, actually?”

There were also a hamburger set meal, clam spaghetti, tomato soup, French fries and a whole lot more food on the table, causing me to be rather shocked because of their astoundingly big appetite. The three of them were rather slim, how could they eat that much food?

“What’s your relationship with Meo? Are you Hiro’s friend?”

Hua-san, who seems to have came from Taiwan, asked in a rapid fire tone.

“Middle schooler? High school?” the onee-san who seems to have came from Philippine interrupted, asking more questions.

“Ah, I’m a high schooler.” Do I even look like a middle schooler? Though I HAD been misunderstood sometimes. “Erm…… It’s hard to say…… Have you heard of the detective agency in the same building as the ramen shop?”

“Oh—“ Yi Ling-san nodded and said: “I’ve heard of it, I think the detective’s a girl, right? What’s she like?”

“What’s she like, huh……”

Actually I don’t really know Alice that well, and I don’t even know what age is she.

“She’s a small, delicate girl who’s about twelve or thirteen, wears pajamas and is cooped up in her room every day. Though she’s quite malicious, her skill of using the computer should be quite good.”

“Really, she’s that young!? How does she count as a detective then, it’s so mystifying.”

With an annoyed expression on her face, Yi Ling-san stayed silent for quite some time. Then, she relit her cigarette, breathed in deeply and then puffed out a large amount of smoke.

“She’s really that young? Isn’t she a detective?”

“Mnn, being a detective should be a self-proclaimed.”

It should be normal when people have this reaction when they learn about Alice, right? The thought suddenly flashed through my mind. But aren’t they being a bit too surprised?

“So that’s how it is, I actually lost to that…… Uwaa, so Hiro is a lolicon! That’s so hurtful……”

She muttered while looking at the ceiling, while the contents of her mutterings really couldn’t be ignored. What does she mean? Does Hiro…… No, how is that possible?

“Yi Ling, you should just forget about that gigolo.”

Hua-san patted Yi Ling-san’s head, meant as a consolation but was pushed away by Yi Ling-san, and then she continued to ask:

“So Hiro is still helping that detective. Does that mean that Meo is there as well?”

“Ah….. yes.”

This afternoon— no, it’s on yesterday— I explained shortly how Meo went to the NEET Detective Agency, and while thinking about it, I really feel that it was really a long day.

“Is the place where Meo is staying at safe?” Jennifer said.

“Mnn— It’s probably quite safe.” If Min-san agrees to help , she is quite reliable.

“Meo is just like our daughter……” Jennifer continued: “I originally hoped to marry someone like Kusakabe-san, and then give birth to a child like Meo.”

“Didn’t your husband get addicted to drugs? He’s quite a match for you!” Hua-san said sarcastically at a side.

“I’ve told him to stop, and Kusakabe-san helped me to beat him up already.”

“But he haven’t found a job, have he?” Yi Ling-san frowned.

“Just tell him to get lost after getting the permanent resident visa!”

The conversation started to stray towards a direction that I couldn’t comprehend, and was mixed with bits of English, Chinese and Filipino. While feeling pressured, I drank my iced coffee with a straw.

“Meo doesn’t know what happened to Kusakabe-san, too?” Yi Ling-san steered the topic back to the main point.

“Nope.” I shook my head, and explained about the phone call from Meo’s father.

“I wonder what Kusakabe-san did……”

“Maybe he got into trouble with Tabara-gumi? But didn’t he leave the gang from Osaka already?”

“Those guys came to the shop just now. Our shopkeeper is an old friend of Kusakabe-san’s from Kansai, so he kept being badgered, and was asked if he’s keeping something for Kusakabe-san. Of course, he didn’t say anything. Hmph!”

The money is indeed the company’s— no, perhaps it belongs to

yakuza?

I decided not to tell them about the bomb-like amount of money in Meo's hands. People who know must die— I thought about what Alice said while interrupting them:

"Erm……"

I felt that my palm was sweating, but I must get this thing clear.

"Is the Hello Corporation…… How should I say this, a criminal company? Or yakuza?"

"Impossible!" The three instantly denied it.

"Then who in the world is looking for Meo?"

"I said that it's the racketeers from Tabara-gumi. It'll be troublesome if people make trouble in our business, so we hire yakuza racketeers. But those people are too avaricious, recently quite a lot of shops stopped working with them, but our shop…… It can't be helped, there's too many foreigners."

This made me even more muddled up about Hello Corporation. They have connections with yakuza, opened a pub, and even rented some nice accommodations for their female foreign workers.

"Although I'm not that clear about it……" Yi Ling-san continued: "But those who are in our profession, more or less would have some connections with that side of the people. Hello Corporation. Hello Corporation provides labor services, and they even provide Japanese classes for us."

"The pay is quite good too."

"But we owe people quite a lot of money at first. Even if we send the money home, half of it would probably be taken away."

"This is just an act of extorting money out of us."

"There's no choice, because it's because of the help given by the guild that we can stay in Japan."

"Guild?" I asked. Topics that I don't understand crop up one after another, and I almost couldn't follow it anymore.

"Hello Corporation is a cooperative guild that is formed from teams

of women who work here, Kusakabe-san is the guild master, so he lives with us. Besides making it easier for us to get visas, the guild would also introduce marriage partners and so on."

I noticed something odd from Yi Ling-san's explanation…… Wait a sec!

"Isn't this what they call a fake marriage……?"

Jeniffer and Hua-san laughed out loud at the same time and said:

"Well, we live together as well. If we don't live in harmony, we can't pass the visa check."

"But how would this work out in the future? If Kusakabe-san is caught……"

"If a delinquent replaces him, I might not continue to work anymore. If it weren't for Kusakabe-san, I really couldn't deal with all this a long time ago……"

"Yi Ling, you're still single anyways, so it doesn't matter……"

The three ignored my presence and started to talk about solemn matters. I listened to their conversation from far away, and started to stir the ice cubes in my glass while relaxing somewhat. Not only was I unable to find out anything about Meo's father, the outrageous topics that followed made me even more muddled up.

The incident that happened last winter was even simpler than this. Strictly speaking, it's just that some people reaped the evil fruit that they sowed. But it's different this time.

Can Alice handle this?

The horizon of the night sky was somewhat blue when we walked out of the restaurant. It was already near dawn. There weren't anyone besides us on the sidewalk, but even at this time, the cars and truck were still busy on the road.

"That's right, I forgot to ask what's your name." Yi Ling-san said.

"Ah, I'm Fujishima. Fujishima Narumi."

"How do you write that?"

Yi Ling-san took out her phone, so I typed out my name on it.

“Oh— so it’s Ming Hai.”

Hearing someone reading out my name in Chinese— I feel that I’ve read something like that in a manga somewhere.

And so, Yi Ling-san and the others exchanged phone numbers with me while standing in the streets.

“Ming Hai, so you’re helping by the detective’s side too?”

“It seems that I’m her assistant.”

I, myself, feel embarrassed when I say that.

“Really? Then if you find Kusakabe-san, please save him. He should know yakuzas better than us, so it’s improbable for him to make trouble himself. He probably did what he did because of some pressing matters.”

Is that really so? If he knows of a way to stealthily take the company’s money but would not get noticed, the people who can do that would probably still do that— I thought while nodding.

“Really, why didn’t Kusakabe-san escape back to Thailand with Meo.”

Jeniffer muttered to herself.

“Yeah, although we’ll be troubled if he isn’t here, but looking at the situation right now, we can’t bail at all……”

“Narumi, tell Kusakabe-san if you see him……”

Hua-san held my hand and said:

“He’s working too hard at Hello Corporation, tell him to escape to somewhere else!”

“Really….. huh?”

“It’s best if he takes the ashes of his wife back to Thailand too……”

It was like cold water was splashed all over me. I looked at Yi Ling-san’s face.

Meo’s mother died in a foreign country.

“I’ll leave Meo to you.”

The three said so, gave me a hug each and then left.

After Yi Ling-san and the others left, I sat on the fence alone and stared blankly at the morning sky. I just felt that the sleepiness locked in my chest couldn’t be released, and couldn’t creep into my brain. Looking downwards, I could only see the slope that descended in a straight line from the southern exit of the station, and the city lights that were threatening the night sky along the slope.

The matter is utterly out of my comprehension, and it gave me a bad premonition. What should we do? Never would I have thought that both our client and the person that we’re searching for would be wanted by the yakuza. What could I do to help in this matter? Thinking back on the scene when the yakuza were chasing me— ahh, it’s impossible. If I meet them next time, I’d probably run away too.

Why did Alice hire me as her assistant? She was just following the flow at first, I understand that. But what about after the Angel Fix incident ended? I, myself, told Alice that I wanted to continue to be her assistant, and she accepted too. So what expectations do she have for me? I don’t know.

The noisy cries of a flock of crows surrounded me and bugged me. It wouldn’t be any help if I continue to ponder about this.

Anyways, this is my first official job since I became Alice’s assistant.

Could I still stay by Alice’s side— that would depend on this time.

During the incident that happened during the winter, I actually didn’t help out with much. Even so, Alice still said that I’m her assistant; no matter how much she abused me, she didn’t really abandon me. So I could only cling onto the small, hopeless possibility.

It’s the same even now.

I can only do what I can do.

Jumping down from the fence, I patted away the sand on me and took my first step on the sidewalk.

Chapter 2

Knowing that I wouldn't get a wink of sleep even if I went home anyways, I directly went to Hanamaru to check out the situation. The steel door of the ramen shop was unexpectedly half open even though it's so early, and trapezium-shaped light shone on the gray asphalt road. Squatting down to look at the interior of the shop, I could see a silhouette with small braids walking in and out of the counter. It was Meo. What in the world is she doing at this time?

I really don't know how to mention her father's problem to her, and since I haven't sorted out my own feelings yet, I really don't feel like meeting her. However, Meo noticed me as I was about to leave, and she opened the door for me. By now, I couldn't escape anymore.

"You're up early, Mr. Assistant."

"No, I just haven't slept yet."

In contrast with my mind, my body was already extremely tired, so I just sat down on the seat in the middle of the counter.

"Min-san is probably still sleeping, right?"

"No no, Min-san said that she always jogs at this time."

Oh? She's quite the athlete.

"In the end, I woke up too. I'm making breakfast right now. Do you want to eat, Mr. Assistant?"

I didn't really notice until she mentioned it. A fragrant smell was indeed floating out from the kitchen, and made me feel somewhat hungry. I was taken aback by the huge appetite of Yi Ling-san and the others, so I only ordered coffee, but I'm feeling rather hungry right now.

"You cooked for me too?"

"Yeah, it's going to be done soon."

The bowl that she brought out was filled with clear soup, porridge, clams and prawns. It was also topped with sesame and leaves of

spices. Although she didn't use any special ingredients (I should mention that most of them were from Hanamaru), the fragrance of foreign cooking filled the shop. She called it Khao Tom, which probably means Thai porridge.

The next dish was a colorful veggie salad, emitting a sweet sour smell, and also had the fragrance of peppermint. This meal is actually quite rich for a breakfast.

"Your cooking is not bad."

"That's because I'm learning to be a good wife."

While washing the pot, Meo answered while smiling. Is she serious or joking?

"How old are you, Meo?"

"Fourteen."

She's two years younger than me, but she seems to be more energetic than I am.

"As long as your parents agree, you can marry after two years. But you don't have anyone you like, do you?"

"I do. My dad."

The green pepper in the salad jammed into my windpipe at that instant, causing myself to hack violently. Meo immediately handed me a glass full of water. She's so considerate. She'll probably be a great wife in the future…… Ah, that's not the point!

"…… Is it okay for you to still dream of being your father's bride even though you're already fourteen?"

"Why? We're not related by blood, so we can marry!"

Eh, is that so?

"My real father died before I was given birth. My current dad met mom at Thailand, and they brought me to Japan after marrying there."

Aside from the skin colour ,Meo's features are actually quite similar to a Japanese person, I even thought that she came from mixed races. So since he's a stepfather, then they can probably marry……

Wait, is that really the problem?

…… Maybe it's this problem?

Though I wanted to comment that it wasn't that right, I really don' know how to say that.

"Hiro taught me too: 'You can just become my adopted daughter, then you can marry your father.' Then I'll be both his daughter and his wife! He was very excited when he said that."

What is that sex offender thinking of……

"But I don't understand, why is Mr. Assistant so agitated too?"

Now that she mentioned it, I don't really know myself. Well…… It's just that…… Is that really okay!?

I swallowed my inexpressible feelings with the porridge, and calmed down after some time. Actually I don't really have to be agitated, as it's not my life anyways.

"I just don't know if dad is willing to marry me."

"You can say that again……" I would say that it's almost impossible. "How old is your father?"

"Mnn…… About thirty eight? But the big sisters who live in the same building said that they cannot see that dad is already at that age. Let me tell you, dad's face is as good looking as a mountain cat when he's sleepy. I love dad's sleepy face."

What does that mean! What kind of sleepy face is that? No, I should say that it's the first time I heard someone praising a man's sleepy face. No matter what, this way of saying it is really rare.

"I was not that good at cooking before, but dad would still eat up all my cooking, which is why I decided to work at a restaurant to improve my cooking. Oh yeah, is it good?"

"Mnn, it's great."

Meo's smiling face is just like a fresh tart, and made me rather envious of Kusakabe Masaya for a moment. He actually let such a girl bring along such a dangerous amount of money, where is he right now? What's he up to?

I thought of ways to explain this dangerous situation. Things have changed so much that even yakuza are involved in it, and I felt moody just thinking about it. I really think it's better if we could convince her to call the police.

"Actually I want to learn more dishes from mom…… Dad probably likes mom's cooking best."

It was as if Meo's eyes was looking at the skies of Thailand far away. Her mother…… Didn't she pass away already?

I suddenly remembered the guild that Yi Ling-san and Jennifer spoke of. They introduce Japanese men to the foreign women working in the country, did Kusakabe Masaya do that too?

"I saw it on a photo, the fact that I look exactly like my mother. So dad….. would probably like me…… right?"

Meo's voice quavered, as if she didn't have much confidence. Is that so?

"Did you tell your father about your thoughts?"

"No."

"Maybe you should ask him after he comes back." Perhaps she would get a scolding at that time?

"You say that like it's really simple. If you can say these things so easily, there wouldn't be so many troubled people in this world."

Mnn, that might be so. I, myself, experienced that first hand in the incident that happened last winter, and I forgot all about it in the end because it didn't affect me much. While I think about it, why am I chatting with a girl about these meaningless topics in the morning?

"I wonder where dad is right now……"

Meo sat down on the chair in the kitchen with her chin on the table.

"Do you know where he might be?"

Meo shook her head.

"I tried to call him from yesterday, but he didn't answer."

“That’s right, tell me your dad’s phone number. If his phone is on him, Alice might be able to find out his location.”

Meo widened her eyes. That’s quite an understandable reaction. But I’ve heard that after three years, people would be able to confirm the location of each phone by using the internet…… I just have this feeling that society would become even more perplexing that time.

“Oh, I see. I didn’t know that because I don’t have a phone.”

It’s rare for people not to have a phone these days.

“Dad says that children don’t need phones. After I grow up, he’ll give me back the phone that my mother used. But it’s no trouble even if I don’t have one, because the only person who I call is dad.”

Meo fluently read out her father’s phone number.

“…… Mnn?”

No phone?

I was lost in thought. Because I thought that having a phone was natural, I overlooked something. Kusakabe Masaya couldn’t contact Meo even if he wants to, while Meo can’t reach him as well.

It’s almost like……

“Mr. Assistant, what’s wrong?”

“…… Eh? Ah! No, it’s nothing. Sorry, please repeat the number again.”

It’s almost like Kusakabe Mayasa doesn’t want Meo to know where he is, but I can’t tell Meo about that.

I entered the phone number that Meo said into the phone. The numbers of three foreign women who works in a special profession and an ex-yakuza…… In just one night, my phone memory went through groundbreaking confusion.

“I just met Yi Ling-san and the others.”

“Were they worried of me?”

“Like a mother worried of her daughter.”

Meo showed me a smile, but her expression immediately clouded over again.

“ …… I want to go home.”

I hesitated for awhile, but decided to tell her the conversation with the others in the end:

“Jennifer said…… If we find your father, then go back to Thailand. Since something like this happened, you can’t go back to the company or your apartment anymore.”

Not only the company, they may even have trouble living in the Japanese society. After hearing my words, Meo just stared at the table without saying anything.

“It’ll be okay……”

She muttered while staring at the table:

“It’ll definitely be okay, he’ll definitely be back. The big sisters would be lonely without dad too.”

No, you don’t even understand what I’m saying.

“There’s no chance of recovery if the relationship is damaged even once.”

“There’s no such thing.”

Being rebuked at once made an indescribable depression surface in my heart. I think I’ve heard similar words somewhere recently.

That’s right, it was Alice. When we mentioned Ayaka, she said: “Don’t you believe in miracles?”

It isn’t really the problem of believing or not believing.

At that moment, my phone suddenly started to vibrate, and the noisy guitar music of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ started to blare from my phone, startling me so much that I almost dropped my phone.

“Hello.....”

‘Why are you still dawdling down there? You should just come report at the office since you’re already here. Didn’t you just meet Meo’s neighbor?’

Really, so that girl is already awake. Or did she even sleep? I really don't know what time she goes to bed.

"Alright, alright. I'm coming."

I sighed and hung up.

"Miss Detective knows that Mr. Assistant is nearby? Does she have psychic powers?" How is that a psychic power?

"Although you wouldn't notice from its appearance, actually there are surveillance cameras all around the building. If anyone comes, Alice would be able to see him from the screen in her room."

"Oh, I see."

Meo looked around, but actually there aren't any surveillance cameras in the shop.

"Is Miss Detective timid?"

"Perhaps."

What is Alice actually scared of? The whole world? Is that why she doesn't go out?

Never mind, it doesn't matter. It's because of the fact that she doesn't go out that I could help, albeit a bit.

✻

"The circles under your eyes are really dark."

Alice glanced at me from her bed, and immediately commented. Because I kept going here and there late night, my body has already frozen, and I almost couldn't cope with the cold air-conditioner in the office.

"Is it really that bad?"

"It reminds me of the time you took the drug."

Alice said that, and made me recall the red markings caused by the Angel Fix. Will I have bruises on my face if I don't have enough sleep now? Please stop joking.

“If you still feel sleepy, then close your eyes and thank God for giving you a chance to sleep.”

She said somewhat unhappily, and turned around to face the keyboard again. The sound of the air conditioner interlaced with the light rhythm of Alice typing on the keyboard. I could still feel a hint of sleepiness, but it drifted about fifty centimeters above me, and doesn’t have any sign of descending on me.

“Alice, what time do you usually go to sleep?”

I suddenly thought of the question. As she’s a hikikomori, maybe she’s nocturnal?

“The moment when I sleep is when everyone in the world sleeps. If only there’s even a single person who may threaten me awake, I will not hand myself to sleep.”

“Er……”

I still don’t understand what she’s trying to say.

“That means that I almost never sleep. The longest time that I have slept is probably about an hour. Some doctors say that it’s an illness, while some doctors say that it’s a physical condition, then expressed their strong desire of wanting to do research on me. That was one of the reasons that I ran away from home.”

“Uh……” Is that problem really okay?

“Strictly speaking, it seems that my brain would go into a half-sleeping mode from time after time. Hmph, it’s the zenith of annoyance. That’s why my life is confined to this small area on my bed. The only time when I can get some rest is when I lie down while tightly holding Mocha Bear. Even then, the fluttering wings of a tiny bug could bring me out of my temporary respite.”

I looked at mocha bears that are much larger than Alice around her. I’ve remembered that Hiro once mentioned, if she didn’t have those bears, Alice wouldn’t be able to sleep. So this statement isn’t completely wrong.

Even if she is cooped up in her room, surrounded by a wall of bears of various sizes, she is still unable to fall asleep.

How would you explain that? It’s definitely an illness!

“To me, the people who would uncaringly hand one third of their time to the darkness are the ones who’s mystifying. Wouldn’t you feel uneasy? The god of slumber and the god of death are brothers in Greek mythology.”

“Do you feel uneasy? Are you that afraid of the things around you?”

“Yes.”

Alice finally stopped typing on her keyboard and looked at me.

“I am afraid of all the things in this world that I am unable to comprehend, preparing to make trouble at a place that I cannot see, expanding and engulfing me.”

“Oh……”

I subconsciously turned my head away.

I could feel it, she wasn’t joking.

“So you, who do not feel fear, just bluntly, lazily sleep without caring about your image.”

“I’m telling you that I can’t sleep!”

I kneeled in front of the bed and said:

“And I’m here to report to you.”

“Mnn, it seems so.”

“The people monitoring Meo’s house are indeed yakuza, and I’ve heard that they’re from Tabara-gumi.”

I repeated what Yi Ling-san, Hua-san and Jennifer told me.

“…… Hello Corporation is a puzzling company.”

“I still don’t know what the company does.”

“It’s a company that provides laborers on the surface, but actually most of the workers are women from south-east Asia and China, and they’re working in a ‘special’ trade. The reason for starting employment courses and so on, is probably for tax avoidance. If yakuza are involved too, it would be better to ask Yondaime.”

“But do we need to investigate the information about the company in such detail?”

Don’t we need to find Meo’s father first?

“The bag that Meo brought had two hundred million yen in it. How do you think that happened?”

“..... Didn’t he defalcate the company?”

“I don’t mean that, I’m asking why is it filled with cash worth two hundred million yen?”

I shook my head. I really don’t know what Alice is trying to say.

“Are you saying that there aren’t that much money in the company? Or are you saying that it’s strange for the company to have that much cash?”

“Those are my questions too, but not only that..... Forget it for now. The information that we have is too little. No matter what, the request that I accepted is to protect Meo and to save Kusakabe Masaya. We can’t just stop after we locate him, so we must first investigate what is happening with Hello Corporation.”

“..... Okay.”

It seems that I can’t help with this matter too. Even if I could, probably it’s just telling Meo the bad news? For example, when her father is proven to be a criminal.

Can I still be the assistant of the detective even then?

“Anyways, we have too little information. Indeed, we started the investigation later than Tabara-gumi, which is why they have more information than us. Thus, we can’t avoid them just because they’re yakuza. If we just investigate the company or the actions of the gang, we might be able to get some threads of information from them.”

“Ah, that’s right. She told me the phone number of her father just now.”

“I’ve already found out his number, and I’m investigating his phone log. Doing this needs a lot of time, if the phone has GPS function, it would be better to locate him.”

After hearing that, I lowered my head weakly. It it's Alice, it's not strange even if she checked the phone log from the start. But aside from the phone log..... Have we forgotten about something? What is it? While hugging my knees, I thought about the doubt in my heart, but I just couldn't figure it out. A person like me, would I be in the heart of things, but still stare blankly with my mouth open like an idiot, looking at things until they turn into regret?

"What are you being autistic for?"

"I'm not being autistic." I lied: "I'm just thinking, there's really nothing that I can help with, even though I'm so free during the spring holidays and only work on Fridays and Saturdays....."

"Maybe I don't sound convincing when saying this, but....."

Alice shrugged and said:

"Please don't mind your position as a detective's assistant too much. No matter you're on tiptoes or is standing upside down, you're still a high school student. But you're just going to be a NEET after you graduate anyways, so I advise you to treasure your ordinary life right now."

"Wow....."

I covered my face with my hand and said:

"Having my employer say that to me really makes myself, who's in an abject situation although I'm still in the grace period of my ordinary life, lose hope for my future."

"You can still visit Ayaka."

My shoulders twitched for a moment. Alice stared at me with cold eyes and said:

"Why are you always so guarded each time you hear Ayaka's name? Do you really hate visiting friends that much?"

"No, it's not that I hate it..... It's just that....."

From that day, I didn't take even half a step into the hospital that Ayaka is staying at. I just couldn't bear to see Ayaka slumbering with her eyes open, and I'm afraid that the miracle that made Ayaka open her eyes that day, is actually just a meaningless

coincidence, so……

The black hair on the bed swayed slightly.

When I raised my head to take a look, I saw Alice laughing soundlessly.

"…… What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing. I just feel that you and I are very alike."

I shook my head.

"Sorry, I'm just mocking myself, so you don't need to think much about it. You don't know if miracles could happen but you are afraid of losing it, while I know that the world don't bear any hostility towards me but I am still afraid. But since you did not make fun of me, I will not make fun of you either."

Alice's words swirled in my mind, and I suddenly showed a relaxed expression and nodded to her.

Then, Alice turned her back against me, but the sound of her typing on the keyboard felt pleasing to my ears.

'You say that like it's really simple. If you can say these things so easily, there wouldn't be so many troubled people in this world.'

I recalled Meo's words. It is truly so.

Suddenly assaulted by a hint of sleepiness, I lied down on the bedside, drifting into dreamland.

✻

I dreamt that I was chased by a large group of pink and purple bears.

"— Uwaaa!"

And I was woken up by my own shouts.

As I was about to raise my head, I felt something on the back of my head and my shoulders fall down. Eyes made of small black buttons were near my own eyes, shocking me into taking a step back

subconsciously. It was after quite some time that I realized that it's only a teddy bear.

The mat slid down from my back, and I sneezed because of the sudden chill. I fell asleep while lying on the bed, but was covered in bears of various sizes for some reason.

"So you're finally awake."

Raising my head, I saw Tetsu-senpai sitting at the edge of the bed, beside me.

Even in the cold air conditioned room, he was still wearing only a T-shirt. His strong chest and muscular arms made me think of the crowd of bears in my dream.

"Erm……"

"Saying that you can't sleep but falling asleep right after that, you really are astounding. I applaud you."

Alice said somewhat grumpily.

Ahh, so I fell asleep. As I was about to stand up, the wall of dolls surrounding me collapsed.

"…… What's with all the dolls?"

"You were sleeping while mumbling something like patrasche and what what not, so I covered you with the mat, but you were STILL shivering. The problem is, there's nothing else in my room that can be used to keep out the cold, and I couldn't turn off my air conditioner, and it'll be troublesome if you just freeze to death here, so that's how it came to be."

"Erm, Alice—"

"Since Narumi's awake now, isn't it better if we tell him to go to the gang's place?"

Tetsu-senpai cruelly interrupted my words.

"Mnn, that's true, it is better this way."

A gang? They aren't talking about Tabara-gumi, are they?

"I'm thinking of asking Hirasaka-gumi for help, but their inbox can't

be opened. It seems that the machine broke down. You're probably more suitable than Tetsu for this job, so inform them about this while checking out what's wrong with their computer."

Oh..... So they're referring to Hirasaka-gumi. Now I have to go to the gang's office again.

But it can't be help, I'm indeed the most suitable candidate. As I suddenly had a new job, sleepiness gradually left me.

"I'll check out the police station, and maybe ask the delinquents over there if they know anything."

Apparently, Tetsu-senpai knows the police quite well.

"But this matter isn't really a case, so if the police got to know what is happening at Hello Corporation, it would go against our client's wishes. But of course, getting new information is nice. So what do you plan to do?"

"I'll think of something. Narumi, let's go!"

Still somewhat sleepy, I was dragged out of the office by Tetsu-senpai.

As soon as I walked out of the room, rays of sunlight pierced my eyes. It's about noon right now, isn't it? Is this what they mean by a scorcher? I should really avoid burning the midnight oil.....

Tetsu-senpai grabbed my collar while walking down the stairs. Eh, what is is? Is he angry? Did I do anything wrong?

"Senpai....."

"You slept in Alice's room two times, didn't you.....?"

Senpai said in a low voice. When I think about it, it seems that way. Though I didn't really fall asleep that time, but was unconscious due to the drug, but what about it?

"Why is that so, perhaps you have something special to you?"

Tetsu-senpai didn't even glance at me, but continued to mutter to himself. I still don't understand what's going on.

"Never mind."

When we reached the end of the staircase, senpai finally looked at me.

“Oh yeah, Narumi, lend me some money!”

Is it me, or is the change of topic too sudden?

“Refused.”

“Please, I’m really confident with the Sakura Gallery. I’ll give you back double the money.”

“The problem is I don’t have any money, why don’t you borrow from Alice? She’s quite rich, actually.”

“How can I do something that embarrassing?”

And borrowing from me isn’t!?

“Really, I wonder how much money we can get from this case……”

“Tetsu-senpai, have you heard about the case this time?”

“I’ve heard all about it when you were sleeping. Meo’s problem, the matter about the Boston bag…… Ah!”

Tetsu-senpai suddenly widened his eyes. At that instant, I immediately knew what he was thinking of.

I ran past the kitchen backdoor and entered the house behind the ramen shop before Tetsu-senpai could have the chance. “Narumi, what are you doing, it’s so noisy!” even though Min-san’s scoldings could be heard, I ignored it. Meo was sitting in the house while holding a steel pan with her legs crossed, using an electronic mixer to blend fresh butter.

“Meo, hurry up and hide the bag!”

“What?”

Suddenly hearing my shouts, a surprised expression appeared on Meo’s face. Then, Tetsu-senpai pushed me away from the back and stepped into the corridor.

“Meo, can you lend me some money?”

“No, dad said to me not to have any money transactions with other

people.”

“Then it’s okay even if you don’t lend me, you can just pretend that it’s an investment, I guarantee you that the money would increase twentyfold after the Sakura Gallery next week.”

“Wait..... Tetsu-senpai, what are you saying!?”

“Sakura Gallery—?”

“That’s right. It’s like this. Eighteen horses run around a large field for one and a half minute, then the money will increase.”

Isn’t that a bit too brief!

“Oh, so it’s horse racing, dad told me about that many times. He said that many people who need money would always borrow money from him on each Friday during the days when he was still a yakuza, and later he could even tell this type of people from their eyes.”

Meo used her large, innocent eyes to look at Tetsu-senpai, and made him feel flustered, while I couldn’t even get a word in.

The tense atmosphere disappeared with the severe pain that assaulted the back of my head, and I could see stars dancing around my head.

“What in the word are you guys up to? Narumi, don’t you need to work today? Stop being an eyesore here and get out!”

Min-san grabbed my collar with the hand she used to hit Tetsu-senpai and I and threw me out of the house. Why did I get beaten up too! It’s a pity that I don’t even have a chance to protest.

✻

Hirasaka-gumi is a self-proclaimed chivalrous organization, and speaking of what they do, they just (try to) deal with the street fights in a mild manner, taking care of the whole city like this. To be exact, they’re just NEET delinquents.

Many shops around this area has the Hirasaka-gumi emblem on it, for instance clubs, stores for sports goods, boutiques and so on. If

you look closely at the corner of their signboards, you would probably see sticker with a swallowtail butterfly, the emblem of the Taira clan, on it.

It is said that these shops had connections to Hirasaka-gumi from the time the shops opened, but I, as a high school student, only heard rumors about this. In reality, the only person who's doing everything is Yondaime, the leader of the gang. The other members always look very free, cooped up in their office all day.

Because of Alice's request, I had to go use the creaking elevator to get to the third floor of the broken down building, nervously open the iron door that the signboard of Hirasaka-gumi is hanging on, and then I saw the office stuffed full of members wearing black T-shirts.

"Err, Alice told me to come….."

As soon as they saw me, almost all of them sprang up from the sofa. About eight people or so.

"A- Aniki, thanks for your hard work!" "Thanks for your hard work!"

These people should be older than me, and yet because of various incidents that happened in the last case, I am now worshipped by these people as their aniki. Most of the members in Hirasaka-gumi are very strong, so when they bowed at the same time, I just couldn't help but take a few steps back.

However, I couldn't see the two who are particularly muscular among them, Rocky and Pole, meaning that Yondaime is probably not here right now. Those two are bodyguards, so they usually tag along his side.

"We're waiting for you, let's start."

"Eh? Wh- What?"

"It's too dangerous."

"Good thing aniki is here, now we can take it easy."

I didn't even know what was happening, but I was dragged to the dark study of the office. There were a wardrobes, bookshelves and a small bed used for resting, and there was a small table with an old

computer on it further inside.

“I don’t know how to explain, but it just refuses to move.” One of them said to me.

“No matter how hard we hammered it, flipped it over, pulled the plug out and in again, it’s useless, so we could only ask for ane-san or aniki for help.”

What kind of idiot would think of hammering it? What if it breaks down!

Windows of Internet Explorer kept opening in the screen, filled the taskbar with numerous windows. This is a computer virus that’s lurking in the dark recently, and is a notorious, aggressive and indelible virus. But if they didn’t open any strange files, the computer probably wouldn’t get the virus that easily.

“Which website were you on when the comp got infected?”

“Eh? About that….. No clue.”

They seemed to be smiling shyly like they were hiding something.

“This virus isn’t really special technically, so there’s little chance of being infected. What did you do online?”

“Oh, nothing really. Nono, we didn’t do anything.”

“Of course we didn’t search for a pornographic website.”

“And didn’t click on a hyperlink that said ‘180 minutes of uncensored blonde babe’.”

I sighed. I really should’ve installed an internet child safety firewall before this.

“We can only reset the computer. The data inside would all disappear, is that alright?”

“What? We put in so much effort to search for an uncensored website too!”

“Idiot, don’t speak of that!”

“No- no problem. Please take care of it before Sou-san comes back.”

Oh, I see. They'll probably get scolded if Yondaime saw that. No wonder they're so agitated. I heaved a long sigh again and sat in front of the computer.

When Yondaime returned, I was just reinstalling the programs in the operating system. The lackeys cheered beside me "As expected of aniki!" "The speed of aniki using the mouse is so quick that I can't even see it clearly!" Can't you guys pipe down? It's distracting.

"Sou-san! Th- th- thanks for your hard work!" "Thanks for your hard work!"

As soon as they heard the sound from the door, the lackeys who were around me rushed to greet Yondaime.

"Gardening Club kid, what are you doing here?"

While walking into the study, Yondaime glared at me, as if his ferocious gaze was telling me that he'll cut off my finger if I move. He wore a crimson Chinese-styled coat with a picture embroidered on it. If other young people wore it, they would probably be said as showing off, but on this person, it feels rather scary. (I recently heard that the picture embroidered on the coat was sewed by Yondaime himself, so the fact that his sewing skills are at professional level is true.) Rocky and Pole stood behind him, the

broadest and tallest men in the gang respectively.

“Well— it seems like the computer has gone haywire.”

The lackeys standing behind Yondaime were pleading with their palms closed, so I didn’t speak the truth.

Yondaime showed an uncaring expression and sat behind the short bookshelf behind me.

He unwillingly thanked me.

“Erm, I’m thinking of limiting the usage of the computer so that people wouldn’t just use the computer as they like. Yondaime, so that you’ll be the only one to use the computer, can you please decide on a password?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to call me that?” He glared at me. Then how should I call you? You’re not telling me to call you Hina, are you? I’ll probably get beaten to death.

“I’m not really good at these things, so just do as you like!”

“Even so, there should still be someone who knows how to operate all the functions!”

“Isn’t it okay if aniki could use it?” Pole said.

“I’m not even one of your members……”

And if it’ll be hectic if I keep getting called here when the computer has a problem.

“Sou-san, what do you think? Why don’t you just use this chance to undergo the sake ceremony with aniki?” Rocky said. I nearly fainted. What is this guy saying!? Yondaime glared at Rocky while frowning, but the other lackeys completely ignored our reactions, and started to get excited.

“Aniki is good at computers, and he’s got brains too.”

“And he’s manly!” “I’ll follow aniki forever.”

Wait a sec, what’s with this situation!? Gimme a break!

“Shut up!”

Yondaime's roar made the excited lackeys shut their mouths immediately.

"What are you guys thinking of? And this guy is still a high schooler too!"

You can't enter the gang if you're not a NEET, it is said that it's the principle of their leader, Yondaime; And I don't want to enter anyways. But Rocky said at this moment:

"Really? But I heard Major and Tetsu-san(?) saying that his attendance is lacking and fails almost all of his tests, and is almost confirmed to be kicked out of school……"

Don't listen to those idiots!

"If aniki joins us, it'll be an instant boost of our strength."

"So noisy. Oi, Gardening Club kid! Hurry up and get into the main topic if you're finished with that."

"…… Ah, yes, okay."

I handed the copy of information I got from Alice to Yondaime, a photo of what looks like a clever man was printed on it. That person is Meo's father— Kusakabe Masaya's photo that Yi Ling-san saved in her phone, I told her to send it to me. You really can't tell that he's almost forty.

Just like last time, I edited the photo to emphasize his face, and his face is really the cat-type.

Yondaime glanced at the photo for a moment and immediately passed it to the others.

"Make five hundred copies of this!"

"Understood! I shall go hone my manly aura right away!"

After some detailed instructions, the lackeys left the room. It's hard to imagine how quick the bunch of idiots from just now could finish their work that quickly. As long as their leader is present, all of them would become uptight.

When only two of us were left, Yondaime turned around and said while looking at me:

“I’ll distribute the photos to the people around this neighborhood, and tell them to keep an eye open, but we can’t continue the investigation if there’s no more evidence. I’ll take a look at manga stores or hostels and so on, Alice should know that, right?”

“She said that would be enough.”

Actually, it seems that Alice wants to know about the condition of Hello Corporation more. To the NEET detective who doesn’t go out, collecting information from yakuza on the internet is much easier than doing a thorough search on the streets.

“Hello Corporation borrowed money from financial companies when it first opened, so I advise you to hand the money and the cash to the police if you don’t want to get hurt.”

“Financial companies?”

“They’re the companies who target people who can’t borrow money from the bank, underground companies who sometimes charge tenfold for their interest. Those people are important sources of money, and they even have close connections with Tabara-gumi, so it’s best if you don’t get involved.”

So it’s really not a normal company. I recalled the two men chasing me at Hello Company and suddenly felt a chill on my back. If I was caught by them at that time, I wonder what would happen to me now? I might not get off the hook with just injuries. But—

“But Alice said that this is a request.”

“You’ll save anyone just because you accepted the request? They’re not even related to you.”

“Does that mean that you don’t save people unrelated to you?”

“The only people that I will help unconditionally are limited to my people and the friends of my people. We should have a suitable borderline, or it’ll be never ending. How many people on this street do you think have been forced to a corner?”

There are about six billion people in this world. Saving all of them, not even God can do that, but……

“Alice…… She really plans to save all of humanity.”

“I know, she’s an idiot.”

I recalled what Alice had said.

‘…… escaping my own helplessness, escaping the world that continues to be lost because of my uselessness…… But even so, I still cannot find the answer.’

It’s not because of pity or her sense of justice, the detective only tries to solve the mystery entangling her clients to deny her own helplessness.

“Tetsu and Hiro help just because they like it, too. What a bunch of idiots.”

Yondaime breathed in deeply, then stood up and said:

“What about you?”

His words pierced deeply into my heart. Why am I taking action? Yondaime is asking me that. But the most regretful thing is, I could not find a suitable answer.

“Because…… I’m Alice’s assistant.”

The reason that I said after some thought was that. That’s not an answer at all.

Yondaime could probably sense that it’s a meaningless excuse as well.

“Being a layman, you shouldn’t push yourself so much. If a fight really happens, it’ll be troublesome to us as well. So you should tell us the moment you feel something’s wrong.”

“Ah…… Alright.”

Yondaime was about to walk out of the study, but I suddenly halted him. He glared at me as he turned around, making me regret calling him.

“What?”

“…… Yondaime, why are you helping us?”

You’re not even related to us.

“I’m not helping you. I’m helping Alice.”

That’s true.

“Also…… I owe you a favor.”

I suddenly felt confused, and blankly stared at Yondaime’s mouth.

“…… Ah, no, isn’t that matter already……”

“I mean what I said, it isn’t something you decide on.”

Why am I being threatened? While thinking about that, I curled up in fright.

“Just scram if there’s nothing else!”

As I was about to walk out of the study with Yondaime, the blaring ringtone of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ started to ring.

‘Bad news. I asked Hiro to check out a few of Hello Corporation’s shops, and their people are everywhere. They are truly looking for Kusakabe Masaya because they think that he ran off with the money. A lady working at a pub even heard the yakuza discussing ‘a bag that can fill two hundred million yen’, so these people are probably looking for Meo too.’

Alice said coolly, as if she knew that it would turn out like this from the start.

“…… Then what should we do?”

‘What do you mean what should we do? I just want to complete my mission. After we locate Kusakabe Masaya, we hand him to Meo, and the rest is up to Meo, as a person harboring a criminal can’t really be blamed if he’s related to the person.’

“Mnn……”

I hung up with a heavy heart. The person who would be in charge of telling Meo would probably be me, huh?

Yondaime forcefully pushed me out of the steel door and walked out, locked it and said:

“You’re not suited for these things. You should just stop.” He said in a low voice.

"…… Why do you say that?"

"The most important thing when you encounter these annoying problems, is that you must be determined to finish it from the start. A person who doesn't have a strong resolve would just cause problems."

While waiting for the elevator, I repeatedly pondered Yondaime's words. Yondaime's borderline is very clear. He would help his people and the friends of his people no matter what, and ignore the rest. What about me? For instance, if Meo asked me to help her to hide her father or help her criminal father escape, what would I do?

I really don't know. I would probably just let Alice handle it, while I'd probably just stay out of it? Because I'm just an assistant— this sentence is so convenient that it's shameful.

"That's why I'm saying that you can't do it."

As soon as the elevator door opened, Yondaime kicked me inside.

"You….. seem rather friendly today……" I said while rubbing my bottom.

"Huh?"

I curled up my whole body after being glared at by the sharp, wolf-like gaze. A cheeky person who doesn't have strong resolve, would indeed only drag them down. The strong sense of disgust directed at myself rose up from my body, and felt like it's forcibly stuffed down my lungs with the help of the accelerating elevator.

I parted with Yondaime after walking out of the building and walked down the slope alone. Walking to the sidewalk beside the road that was in a traffic jam, I supported myself on the railings and sighed, as I finally solved a troublesome matter. But at least I could still do these things, which made me feel that I'm not really that useless.

✻

"Ming Hai! Over here!"

Separated by a sidewalk that was crowded with a lot of people, Yi

Ling-san noticed me and waved at me while holding her phone. The person who asked me out to the crowded bus stop at the west exit of the station on this Sunday afternoon was Yi Ling-san. She wore a yellow shirt that showed her shoulders with a pair of jeans. Her casual appearance was very different from what she wore at night.

“I wasn’t being followed, so it should be okay.”

Yi Ling-san came closer to my side and grabbed my hand after saying that. Not expecting her action, I nearly fell down.

“It looks like those people are looking desperately for Meo, so we must be more careful.”

“Eh? Ah, that’s right.”

“You probably haven’t had lunch yet, right? I’ll treat you.”

Though I wasn’t too hungry, we decided to go to Rodran Coffee Shop. As it’s still noon, there were a lot of people in the shop. I ordered only coffee ole and sandwiches, found a table by the windows, then Yi Ling-san walked over while holding a platter full of food, as usual.

“These are Meo’s clothes, the ones that you asked me to get.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

Yi Ling-san and I sat opposite to each other, and she handed me a large paper bag. As I wasn’t able to sneak into Meo’s house yesterday, I handed the keys to Yi Ling-san and asked her to get Meo a change of clothes.

“I was just about to go out, and the yakuza came over again. I just live next to them coincidentally! They’re really troublesome, so I told them that I was in a hurry and ran out.”

“What did they ask you?”

“They asked me, what did you say yesterday? Are you keeping something for someone? Do you know where he’s hiding, and so on. They also asked about Meo, because they know that our relationship is quite good. Shouldn’t we tell Meo to call the police? But she’ll get into trouble too…… But not doing that might be even more troublesome…… Hmm……”

“Meo detests the police.”

“I dislike the police as well.”

Yi Ling-san covered her face and shook her head violently.

To them, the Japanese police aren’t people who just protect them, but……

I hesitated for awhile, then told her about the Boston bag. Yi Ling-san pressed her forehead with her hand and sighed.

“So he really did defalcate the company?”

Taking the company’s money and hiding it at home, but failed, so he told his daughter to take away the money. This is actually quite a simple story, but if this became reality, Meo would become an accomplice (even if it wasn’t deliberate). When I started to ponder about the question, Yi Ling-san suddenly asked:

“Would that be our wages this month?”

“…… What?”

“Kusakabe-san gives us our wages himself each month, so it wouldn’t be strange even if there’s some cash at home. And you’re talking about a Boston bag, right? I saw that before this.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Yeah, Kusakabe-san brought the Boston bag to the company sometimes. Because we learned Japanese using post, Kusakabe-san compiled our syllabus each month. I originally thought that he used the Boston bag to bring those to the company.”

Which means, he brought back the wages in the bag after leaving the company?

“But…… it’s about two hundred million yen in total…..”

“Almost all of the people living in that building are employees, so it’s about right……”

Yi Ling-san stared at the sky while counting on her fingers, then heaved a sigh.

“Two hundred million yen is still too much.”

And they even let people see the bag that holds the money? What a strange company.

“Don’t you all have bank accounts?”

“Don’t you look down on us!” Yi Ling-san laughed while flicking on my forehead: “We keep the money in the bank after getting them. After deducting some automated charges, we have to send some money home; so probably there’s not even half left. What a meaningless procedure.”

“Then why are they giving you cash?”

“I don’t know either.”

“Would that be……” because it’s easier to defalcate the company this way?

For example, even if it’s their wages, he used his daughter to get the money from his house and run away, so there’s probably still some hanky panky going on.

“You look like you’re being suspicious of everything.”

Well…..

“It’s because I’m a detective……’s assistant.”

Yi Ling-san laughed heartily, but her laughter soon stopped.

“I really don’t understand. Why did that guy tell her daughter to do such a dangerous thing? He’s wanted by the yakuza too.”

“…… Why is the yakuza looking for Meo too?”

“You’re asking me?”

“If it really is the company’s money, then how does it concern the yakuza?”

“Perhaps the company hired yakuza to help?”

“Then why didn’t they just call the police?”

“Hmm…… Yeah— you have a point.”

Yi Ling-san spaced out while biting her straw.

“Is it because they don’t want the public to know? Or that might not be our company’s money at all, but the yakuza’s money? But Kusakabe-san shouldn’t be able to use the gang’s money…… I really don’t understand.”

I suddenly thought about Meo who was happily mixing the butter behind the kitchen of Hanamura Ramen Shop and felt a chill on my back. A young girl who doesn’t know anything that has a bomb-like amount of money on her hands, is now in our hands.

“Please protect Meo.”

Yi Ling-san pleaded in a low voice. I lightly nodded, but I didn’t really feel confident about that.

✻

It was about two when I finally reached Hanamaru Ramen Shop. I feel like I’m practically living here right now. While I think about it, I didn’t go home for two days straight, my sis would probably give me a huge scolding soon.

Although lunch time was about to end, there’s unexpectedly still three customers sitting on the tables. Min-san looked quite busy cooking.

Walking into Min-san’s living room and storeroom from the kitchen back door, I couldn’t see Meo anywhere.

“Min-san, do you know where Meo is right now?”

With her back against me, Min-san answered with her eyes glued to the fire:

“Ah, Meo is at Alice’s place.”

“What?”

I pressed the doorbell of room 308, but there wasn’t an answer. Usually, a blue light would light up, but at this moment only the sound of flowing water came from the room.

Flowing water?

Then, there came a voice saying “Coming, coming— please wait for

a moment". I was startled, and took a step back. It was Meo's voice.

Meo opened the door and poked her face out of the door. Her hair was wet, the slight steam her body was giving off smelled of soap, while a large towel was wrapped around her body. My hand held the handle, while my body froze.

"Meo, don't open the door when you don't even know who's there, you're too careless! And my hair isn't clean yet, hurry up and help me. Uwaa! Shampoo trickled into my eyes, MEO!"

Alice's hysterical voice came from the room, asking for help.

"Okay, okay. Ah! Would that be my clothes, by any chance?"

She pointed at the paper bag on my hands.

"This…… Er, ah , yes…… That's right."

"Thank you. Miss Detective is angry right now, so I'll have to close the door. Mr. Assistant, you can come in and wait for awhile."

I was about to say that it's better if I wait outside, but I was forcefully dragged into the room with the paper bag. Light could be seen from the bathroom close to the entrance (first time seeing that). I accidentally saw long, black hair full of bubbles, so I hastily turned around and stuck my face to the wall.

"Sorry, I'll wash your hair now!" Meo went back to the washroom, and I heard the sound of the misty glass door closing.

"Miss Detective, don't move around so much!"

"Uuuu— my eyes hurt!"

An incomprehensible conversation came from the other side of the fog.

` In my sixteen years of living, I have never felt as uncomfortable as I am right now. The six minutes filled with the sounds of splashing water were probably the longest six minutes in my whole life.

"Since you've waited until we finished bathing, you should probably have something to report, right? Hurry up, then."

Sitting on Meo's thighs, Alice's tone was extremely annoyed. Of course, both of them are now fully clothed. Meo used a large towel

to wrap Alice's head and rubbed repeatedly.

"Miss Detective's hair is very long, so it's hard to take care of it."

"It'll dry naturally if you just leave it alone."

"You'll get sick like that."

…… I feel like I saw this scene somewhere before. Does everyone

feel like playing with Alice as soon as they see her?

“Narumi, stop thinking about Ayaka and start reporting!”

Her pointed remark made me curl up my body. Why is this girl’s sixth sense so accurate when it comes to meaningless things, really……

“Ayaka?” Meo cocked her head.

“She’s just like you, a girl who likes to wash and comb my hair.”

Eh? So she once bathed with Ayaka?

“I heard that Miss Detective doesn’t know how to take baths.” Meo explained: “Usually Min-san would bathe with her every two days, and help her to wash her hair. But Min-san seemed to be rather busy today, so I volunteered to come.”

“That’s enough. If Master is busy, she should directly forget about my hair.”

I was completely ignorant towards how busy Min-san was. And really, this girl’s capability to survive is almost zero……

“Narumi, what are you here for! Are you here to see my wet look so that you can make fun of me?”

“Ah, no, sorry.” I waved my hands in denial. As they didn’t look nervous at at, it almost made me forget the reason that I was here.

“I heard something from Yi Ling-san about the company, and I was thinking of telling you about that.”

I reported the information about Kusakabe Masaya handing the people in Hello Palace their wages personally, thinking that it probably isn’t related to the case. However, Alice’s gaze immediately sharpened after hearing that.

“She told you that Kusakabe Masaya gave out the wages personally? Are you sure?”

“…… Yeah.”

“So that’s how it is. Which means— UWAA!”

“Dad wouldn’t pocket the employee’s wages, definitely not!”

Meo said while tightly hugging Alice.

“Le- Let go of me, it hurts! I didn’t even say anything like him pocketing the employee’s wages!”

Because of Alice’s frantic struggles, the large towel fell down from her head.

“Even so, no matter how we think…… I think the results would be as we expected.”

“Narumi, don’t jump to conclusions so quickly……” Unexpectedly, Alice was standing at Meo’s side. “There are a few problems regarding the theory that Kusakabe Masaya defalcated the company. Firstly, the structure of the company isn’t so big that someone could just pocket two hundred million yen. Apart from that, the money is in cash. Besides that, the yakuza are looking for two hundred million yen, which matches the sum of money in the bag. But how did they know how much money was in it? Even if the pocketed money was confirmed by the company to be two hundred million yen, why is the money still here?”

“Ah……”

She was right. It’s indeed strange.

“Of course, there is a possibility that Kusakabe Masaya’s hobby is saving money, or he likes to smell the money……” “My dad isn’t that kind of crazy person!” “Saving the money because of certain reasons, but couldn’t use it because the amount of money is too large…… These reasons are plausible too, but there’s now a fact that overturns these assumptions— the fact that only the yakuza are looking for Meo and Kusakabe Masaya.”

“Then……” I don’t really want to think about this possibility: “Maybe he kept money for Tabara-gumi, then he ran away with it……”

I felt Meo staring daggers at me.

“There’s that possibility too. If so, the question why he’s keeping money for yakuza would arise once more. Anyhow, the information that we have is insufficient. Thinking about this is my job, so you can stop making unnecessary assumptions, and do your own job.”

She actually said that I’m doing unnecessary assumptions. Alright,

alright. I'm an idiot anyways.

"…… Then my job is?"

"Call the lady, Yi Ling. Ask her who's she paying the automated charges each month. Or how she sends her money back to China. If there's a chance, then ask her about the other people living in Hello Palace."

"…… What?"

Alice told me the things that I should ask in a rapid fire tone, but I don't get it at all. The public facilities maintenance fees, administrative fees, rental fees and even how much money Yi Ling-san and the others send home, are those even remotely connected to the case?

"It's because we don't know if they're related that we should investigate it. Just hurry up and call her."

When Major arrived at the NEET Detective Agency, I was just using the fax machine in the room to receive the copy of Yi Ling-san's savings in the bank that she just faxed over.

"Why is there a faint smell of soap in the air? Vice Admiral Fujishima, please explain yourself!"

He immediately pressed a model gun onto the back of my head as soon as he came in. Ahhhh, another noisy fellow came in.

"You didn't answer your phone at all yesterday, where did you go?"

"I was in a late night skirmish at Takadanobaba, but then the police came; I was just about to explain the dangers of having a gunfight in the streets, then I was brought to the police station with five of my mates. Hmph, the police are indeed useless."

You'll definitely get arrested that way. Are you an idiot? When I turned my head around, I saw a young man clad in military clothing, while his figure looked like that of a primary school student. It's really surprising that someone like this is actually a college student. Major pushed his goggles onto his helmet, then looked into the bedroom.

Meo was hugging Alice tightly, as though she wanted to protected from an assault, and stared at Major guardedly.

“Meo, don’t just keep hugging my neck all of a sudden, are you trying to throttle me?”

“Because there’s a suspicious person here.”

“It’s okay, his attire can’t be compared with the weirdness in his heart, so just relax.”

Was…… Was she even trying to defend him?

“So you’re the client this time? I’m Major. Vice Admiral Fujishima’s superior.”

“I felt something strange from before, but isn’t a Vice Admiral superior to a Major?”

“That’s why they say rookies don’t know anything.”

Major showed us a casual expression while shaking his head, then placed his gun into his backpack.

“Actually, a Major has the most authority in the army, it’s common knowledge. For instance, the Major in ‘The Last Army’ unhesitatingly killed his superiors.”

“Isn’t that a manga?”

“In the later stages of war in A Baoa Qu, didn’t the Major kill the Major General? But he wasn’t even interrogated.”

“That’s an anime!” And also it’s because he lost the war.

“Oh yeah, did you guys find out where the office of Tabara-gumi is?”

Completely ignoring my objections, Major changed the topic.

“Investigation must start from spying. Look at the pin-shaped spying device, compared to the ones last year, it’s ability to receive sound and lasting power has already tripled.”

Major took out some suspicious devices from his backpack and arranged them on the ground.

“So Miss Detective is friends with a lot of bad people……” Meo said in a low voice.

“This job can’t be done by the kind common people. Major, you should know the address of the company, right? Then set it up there first. Though we only found out one of the locations of Tabara-gumi.” Major recorded the address that Alice said in his phone. “Tabara-gumi is a yakuza gang at the bottom of the yakuza hierarchy, but if they have connections with other gangs of a higher rank , the time required for the investigation would increase drastically.”

“There’s no problem even if we need to set up one or two hundred spying devices, but we need someone to listen to and reorganize the information, and I can’t help out with that. So we can only set it up at two places, at most. That’s my job anyways.”

“We would know the identity of the people related to this if only we know the source of the money. They probably know more about Kusakabe Masaya, too. Compared with chasing a hidden rabbit, it would be easier to follow the hunting hounds…… Mnn.”

Tearing down the paper from the fax machine, Alice looked through the contents for a few seconds, crumpled it up and threw it to her pillow, saying:

“Kusakabe Masaya did not take anyone’s money.”

“Really?”

Meo and I said at the same time.

“Don’t get so happy so soon.”

Alice pressed her head on Meo’s chest as she started hugging Alice tightly again.

“If my assumption is correct, defalcating the company wouldn’t be so troublesome. What a pity.”

“What…… does that mean?”

The problem is, Alice would just say the lines that detectives from anywhere, anytime to answer my questions (as usual)—

“I can’t disclose that information as of now.”

I sighed impatiently. Alice continued:

“I’ve mentioned this before, the truths that I got to know is only a

portion of what is in God's notebook, and is completely meaningless to the common man. To make it into valuable facts, we need to give more effort."

"…… Mr. Assistant, can you translate for me? My dad didn't do anything wrong, right?"

Meo said on top of Alice's head.

"That means that we don't have enough evidence, so we aren't sure yet."

After hearing my statement, Major nodded and stood up.

"Then I shall go forward and put in my best efforts. I've been late because there weren't any incidents lately, but I feel excited when I think that I can try out my new works! I guarantee you that I would even clearly record how many times the yakuza hiccupped for you to listen to."

After randomly saying some dangerous actions, the silhouette clad in military clothing disappeared out of the room. Alice said:

"Narumi, please remember that we do not need facts in the case this time."

"…… What?"

"The case this time is different from what happened in Angel Fix. Our job is to protect Meo and to locate Kusakabe Masaya, isn't that right?"

Alice raised her head to look at me, while Meo nodded in my stead.

"So we don't need to worry about digging out the truth from the grave. If the case requires it, you must be prepared mentally for the truth and facts to get twisted."

"Do you mean making decisions without evidence?"

"You really are a person who only knows literary works."

About these matters, I already decided to do so even though I have not resolved to do it. I am different from Alice, I don't have a need to know every single thing, it's just that I don't know what I should do. And only at these moments, I would admire Alice for her resolve.

“If so, then take Meo back to Master’s room.”

“That won’t do, I haven’t dried your hair yet.”

“You hear that? She actually said something like that. I explained quite a few times that having hot wind blown on one’s face is very painful, but she just wouldn’t listen. Really……”

But I didn’t listen to Alice’s instructions this time. Isn’t it better for Meo to finish taking care of her hair before leaving?

“Oi, let go of me, Meo! Narumi, don’t move, why aren’t you listening to me!?”

Ignoring the noisy Alice in Meo’s hands, I walked out of the office.

✻

What should we do next? While walking down the stairs, I thought of what we could do, but it really seems that there’s nothing else to do anymore. The small, dark space behind the kitchen backdoor was deserted, and that made me somewhat depressed. So I’m a person who doesn’t know what to do if other people don’t order me around.

Although I don’t have to work today (As I’m still on probation, I only need to work on Fridays and Saturdays), but since I was free anyways, I’d just go help out Min-san. As I was about to open the backdoor, my phone started to ring.

‘Narumi, please help me.’

Tetsu-senpai’s agitated voice came from the phone all of a sudden.

“Wha- What’s wrong?”

It was the first time I heard Tetsu-senpai so agitated.

‘Where are you right now? At Hanamaru?’ “Eh? Yeah……” ‘I’ll tell you my location, just come here quickly!’ “Ah, wa- wait a sec……”

Tetsu-senpai started to tell me the address. I could hear the voice of another man near him, and there are also the sounds of things colliding. What’s wrong? Where in the world is he?

‘Don’t mention this to anyone, or I’ll get killed. Thanks for the help.’

He said something scary, then hung up. Though my question and queasiness swirled in my mind, I immediately started to pedal my bike.

The building that senpai mentioned was a journey of about five minutes from Hanamaru Ramen Shop on my bike. As there weren’t any notable shops or anything nearby, I only managed to find it after some effort. I rushed to the top of the seven storey building and pressed the doorbell of room 701.

A pale man of about forty could be seen from the gap that opened. His lower eyelid sagged, and there was a deep scar beside his mouth and nose. I was so taken aback that I took quite a few steps back until my back bumped into the wall.

“Tetsu, he’s a kid?”

The man looked back into the room and said.

“He’s the guy I mentioned, let him in.”

Tetsu-senpai’s voice came from the room, causing me to almost fall down onto the floor with relief after I heard it. That’s a relief, he’s still alive.

The man pulled down the door chain and opened the door wide, poking his head out to observe the corridors, then glared at me while raising his chin, telling me to go in.

“Come in!”

“Eh? Ah, erm……”

“Hurry up!”

I stepped into the room with my whole body rigid. The scarred man closed the door, locked it then double locked it with the door chain. Eh? Wait, is there a need to be so cautious?

Being brought into the innermost room of the room that had two rooms and a kitchen, I was dumbfounded by the hellish scene that I saw.

There were three other men in the room surrounding a square table. They were Tetsu-senpai, an afro guy wearing a flowery shirt, and a

muscular octopus-like person who had his brows and hair shaved off. And then they're—

"Pong!"

"Too weak! Tetsu, don't you cry after this."

On the table that had a layer of some sort of wooly paper on it, a whole lot of mahjong tiles were placed on it.

"Narumi, you're just in time. Lend me two thousand."

Tetsu-senpai, who originally had his back to me, suddenly turned his head over, and stretched out his hand with an agitated expression on his face.

"Eh? Ah, okay……" Because of his agitation, I subconsciously took out my wallet.

"Didn't I tell you that you could just borrow from me?" Octy said.

"Nemo-san, if I borrowed it from you, you might just demand for ten percent interest after ten minutes."

"Even so, you don't need to borrow from some kid, do you?"

"I've already reached this state, there's no reason for me not to show my cards!" Tetsu-senpai snatched the two thousand yen, threw it down on the table and pushed down the rest of his tiles.

"You actually collected that much pins."

"Which tile were you waiting for?"

"Though I'm not too sure, but shouldn't I be able to call mahjong if I have a lot of pins?" Tetsu-senpai said.

"The 2,5,8 pins and 3,6,9 pins are six…… Wait!" I unintentionally interrupted, then roared at senpai: "What on Earth are you doing!?"

"Can't you see? We're playing mahjong!"

I flew over here just because I was worried about you, you idiotic gambler!

"It can't be helped, as I don't even have the money to call yaku. Whoa, tsumo! Dealer wins, three straight wins with three north

winds (Z: Mahjong terms are making me dizzy)……”

What do you mean by it can’t be helped? Tetsu-senpai had a huge comeback after receiving my two thousand yen, and ignored me, who was still furious. The gambling that took place on the table was different from my understanding of mahjong. Not only that there’s only three players (The guy who brought me into the room only helps to pour the coffee and change the ten thousand yen, and is not taking part), directly using cash to replace tokens is also something to be in awe of. If anyone wins, cash flew all over the table. The method of calculating the points seemed to be different as well……

The two thousand yen that I provided increased drastically and halved again, making me tremble in fear.

“Tetsu, do you want to have lunch together? What about you, Gu-san?”

After about an hour, Octy stood up. The afro guy called Gu-san shook his head.

“I have to look at some pawned items.”

“That’s too bad.”

Listening to the conversation of the yakuza (probably) from afar, I felt somewhat dizzy because of the tiredness that suddenly welled up in me. Fortunately, senpai won some money. Thank God…… I was just thinking that when— “Nemo-san, here’s the two hundred thousand I owe you.” “Okay!” He immediately handed the stack of cash that he won to Nemo-san.

“That’s all of it.” Senpai’s expression was like he got rid of a huge burden.

` “My two thousand yen……”

“Oh yeah, just let me owe you that for the moment. If possible, just forget about it!”

“How can I forget about it!? Two thousand yen is a lot!”

After walking out of the building, Octy brought Tetsu-senpai and I to a sushi shop for some reason. According to him, it seemed like it was because they needed a player to join their game, so he lent

Tetsu-senpai two hundred thousand without interest, even promising him not to collect an entry fee and to treat senpai to lunch, so that he would join their game. That would mean senpai already lost two hundred thousand before I even reached there. It's too scary. Being squeezed in the middle of senpai and Octy in the sushi shop, my hand holding the cup trembled. And also, why are we sitting like this? Why am I in a pincer attack!?

"Oh, I see. So this is the guy who dealt with the kids who sold the drug. I've heard of it before. I really can't tell that you're that audacious. I'll treat, so eat up."

It seems that the yakuza heard about the incident before this. Octy seemed abnormally friendly. Really, don't treat me like this. I could only timidly order kappa maki rolls and tamago sushis to eat. Then Octy asked me: "Well? Why don't you just quit school and join our gang?" He actually asked me a thing like that. Senpai, help!

"Nemo-san, Narumi is a talented person who is shouldering the future of the NEETs, so please don't ask him to join your gang." And don't just tell me to shoulder such a thing!

"So you two are old friends…… right?"

I frantically changed the topic like a coward.

"No, it's our first time meeting. You could say that we're friends of a friend. We just had our first conversation through the phone just now, and he said that they're lacking a player."

I nearly spitted out the kappa maki roll in my mouth. The first time!?

"I was surprised too." He doesn't seem to be surprised to me. "He's quite famous, so I heard about him. I heard that he's a crazy idiot. I was just joking, but I didn't really think that he would actually come, but that isn't really related to someone's bravery or anything. What a pity, I wanted to let him owe us some money so that he would join our gang."

I stared blankly at senpai's face. Doesn't he want to live anymore?

"Our gang would grow, it's a share with potential. And you don't even have a job, right?"

Ahhhh, that's bad, he came back to the same topic again.

“I’m really good at palmistry. How about it? Would you like me to read yours?”

Octy forcibly grabbed my right hand and touched the lines on my palm with his fingers.

“See? Your heart line is longer than your head line, this type of palm is extremely suited to become yakuza.” Are there even anyone whose head line is longer than their heart line!? Is this guy an idiot!? But I dare not rebuke him, for fear of being killed.

“I’m good at astrology too. When is your birthday?”

“…… October thirty first.”

“Then you’re a scorphio. Scorpios are really suited! The people born between first of March and February twenty eighth are suited to being yakuza.”

Just say that everyone are suited!

“Nemo-san, what’s your horoscope?”

“I’m a yakuza.” (Z: Horoscopes in Japanese have a ‘za’ behind them. Here, Nemo-san is trying to make a pun)

“I know that!”

Ahhh, I’m finished…… My tongue slipped, so I’ll get killed. Octy laughed heartily while hitting my back, causing the counter of the sushi shop to sway.

“You really have potential Why don’t you just join our gang with Tetsu?”

“I’m not joining such a troublesome job.” Senpai answered. He’s so calm that it’s annoying.

I ordered only kappa maki rolls. I frantically stuffed them into my mouth, focusing on the taste of the cucumbers.

And so the two chatted beside me, and the conversation was steered to the direction of the case.

“Nemo-san, you know Kusakabe Masaya, right? He once worked in Osaka.”

"…… Are you involved in it?"

Octy lowered his voice. I was surprised, and drank a mouthful of tea to dilute the taste of the sushi.

Oh, I see. So Tetsu-senpai wasn't just playing mahjong for fun, but collecting information.

"Did you play mahjong with me just because of this? Idiot…… It'd be better if you don't meddle in this. Though only Tabara is involved for now, other gangs might be involved after this. This isn't a matter that you can get off the hook so easily."

"You should've told me such constructive advice much earlier."

Octy punched Tetsu-senpai from above my head. A 'thud' sound came from above. His punch was blocked by senpai's palm.

"Hmph!" Octy sat down again, and the chef looked at this side with a scared expression on his face from the other side of the counter.

"What is your relationship with Kusakabe?"

"I can't say that. Nemo-san, please tell us everything you know about him."

"Well aren't you greedy. I've already told you all that I know."

I observed Octy's actions in fear. His shadow caused by his sunken eyes looked even more frightening from the side. As I was about to catch hold of Tetsu-senpai's hands and escape, Octy started to say:

"For what reason do I have to tell you that?"

"Didn't you undergo the sake ceremony with Kusakabe? Though you can't help in this matter because of your opposing stands, you can just tell me anything you know, you might be able to help him."

Octy squinted his eyes.

"Where did you learn about this?"

"That's confidential."

Tetsu-senpai lightly brushed off the topic, tossing his sushi into his mouth. Then, he suddenly pushed me away and pleaded to Octy

with his head lowered:

“Please.”

At that moment, all was silent in the shop, even the chef was waiting with bated breath while holding his knife. As for me, I was so scared that I couldn’t even look at Octy’s face.

Finally, Octy spoke:

“Do you have any proof you aren’t Kusakabe’s enemy?”

“Only my life.”

I felt a chill on my back— both Tetsu-senpai, who said those words, and Octy, who laughed after he heard that, made me feel ghastly.

“We talked on the phone. Though I wasn’t the one who picked up the phone.”

I nearly asked: “When was that?” but forced myself to stay silent.

As Octy looked at me with an expression that I wasn’t sure if it was in anger or in laughter, making me feel extremely intimidated.

“He called yesterday, so he’s probably still in this area.”

“By phone? Why?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“He asked me to help smuggle him out of the country, but I couldn’t comply with his request as it was too sudden.”

Smuggle him out of the country?

“Is he thinking of hiding in another country?”

“It seems like he didn’t just ask us, but other units as well. He’s asking about Korea, Hong Kong or Singapore, so he’s probably trying to run away.”

Hiding in another country— then what about Meo? I gulped down the bad thoughts and the taste of the kappa maki rolls with a mouthful of tea.

“With Kusakabe’s contacts, it shouldn’t be a problem for him to hide somewhere in Kansai. I really don’t know what he’s thinking, asking about this and that even though he’s on the run. He’ll die if a

brainless guy tells Tabara-gumi about this."

"It's indeed strange. He could actually run far, far away by now."

"As for you, you probably know where the girl and the two hundred million is, right?"

Tetsu-senpai's eyebrows didn't even twitch because of this question. But when he saw my face, Octy suddenly laughed.

"Tetsu, you really have some guts, but this guy has the answer all over his face."

I was so abashed that I wanted to run away immediately from the scene, and I sneaked a peek at Tetsu-senpai's expression. Is this guy really okay? He wouldn't just sell us out, right? Octy smacked my back and suddenly recovered his solemn expression.

"It's not the company's money, obviously."

"Then what is the relationship between the company and Tabara-gumi?" Tetsu-senpai asked.

"You're meddling in this even though you don't know?" Octy wiped his bald forehead with a tissue. "The current head of the company is Mikawa, and he borrowed money from Tabara when he first started the company with Kusakabe. Of course, the debts haven't been cleared yet, so they couldn't refuse any request from Tabara. Kusakabe was in the yakuza, so he knew from the start that it would turn out like that, which is why he dislikes that. But no money means no work done."

"Which means, Kusakabe could only give in."

"Probably."

"Then where did the money come from?"

"How would I know about that? I can only tell you about this."

After walking out of the sushi shop, Octy immediately lowered his voice and said:

"You should get this clear, you should first join them if you want to get information from a gang. Probably many people mentioned this to you before, right? You really should consider it."

“I’ll be a NEET forever!”

Octy roared in laughter, his voice so loud that it almost broke my back. He then pushed Tetsu-senpai in the chest and left after saying ‘I’ll leave Kusakabe to you’.

Seeing his silhouette disappear from the streets, I used all my energy to heave a sigh. Tetsu-senpai laughed while stroking my back.

“Narumi, you don’t need to be that nervous.”

“…… Why did you let me sit in the middle?”

“Well, I heard that he’s a gay. So that’s just a precaution……”

Oh please, how is that a precaution!?

“Never mind, never mind. They have absolutely no connections with Tabara. Having connections with yakuza can be helpful sometimes.”

Oh, I see. So Tetsu-senpai’s network of contacts is formed like this. I felt extremely weak, and sat on the separator between the sushi shop and the parking lot. I’d probably be unable to move for awhile.

“We had quite the haul today. Narumi, thanks. I was worried of what would happen if I didn’t get a tsumo. I really don’t want to owe them money the first time I meet them.”

“You actually found out that he’s Kusakabe’s friend, how did you do that……”

“Mnn? Oh, it wasn’t that hard.” Senpai answered casually: “I called all the Kansai yakuza that I know, and most of them went ‘What? What nonsense are you speaking?’ , until I hit the jackpot with Nemo-san. I gave a lot of calls, it’s so tiring.”

Is he kidding? This guy really don’t want to live anymore.

“Not giving up is the key to being a good detective.”

I never would have thought that a NEET would tell me to not give up, but I can’t deny that he’s right this time.

“At least we know that Kusakabe is still in the area. It’s lucky that

Nemo-san is a person that you can talk with, really.”

“Yeah…… He seemed that he was quite decent.”

He’s unlike the yakuza who I had in mind, the ones who speak rudely and ask unreasonable demands, it’s just that he looks somewhat scary. But senpai’s expression suddenly became solemn.

“Narumi, listen, you have to remember this.”

He caught hold of my hand and pulled me up.

“There is no good yakuza on this world, a good yakuza is a dead yakuza.”

Is that so…….

“…… Yondaime too?” I suddenly thought of him, and asked randomly.

“I killed that guy about fifty times already, so he should be a pretty decent yakuza.”

Tetsu-senpai answered while smiling. Wasn’t he killed for about fifty times as well?

“We could only wait for news from Yondaime now. If he’s still in the city, then Hirasaka-gumi can find him.”

✻

I was already deprived of sleep that day, and was also dead tired due to running around, so I fell asleep as soon as I got home.

When I was woken up by a blaring noise, it was already pitch dark. Not knowing that I fell asleep while lying on my stomach, I struggled quite some time even to stand up.

I even forgot that I should just turn on the lights, but kept searching in the dark for the source of the loud noise. It was the music of ‘Colorado Bulldog’, which meant that Alice was calling.

After locating my phone after some time, I saw that it was five minutes after midnight. Why is she calling me at this time?

‘Someone reported that they saw Kusakabe Masaya. The photos Yondaime distributed finally worked, so we’re starting to spy on him. Come here immediately.’

“…… Now……? I’m really tired.”

My mind was still foggy, unsure of the situation. Someone saw Kusakabe Masaya? Didn’t we just send the photos half a day before? Aren’t they quick.

‘I’m telling you to come here immediately. Do you mean to say that sleeping for another hour means immediately in your dictionary?’

“No, alright, I’m coming. But can’t you just wait for another hour?”

‘It can’t be helped if you’re late. But I would confirm that you got lost on the way here, then distribute the photo of you sleeping happily in my dolls with your mouth wide open to, for people to search for you.’

“When did you take that photo!” Any hint of sleepiness immediately disappeared, then I jumped down from the bed.

‘You know that I get nervous easily, so I will only wait thirty minutes because I’m too worried of your safety.’

Then, she hung up. I threw my phone onto my bed, then put on a jacket.

Chapter 3

Standing in front of the door to the rooftop, I reconfirmed the time on the liquid plasma screen of my phone in the darkness. It was two thirty at night. As I was badgered by Alice to wake up just now, so today, I have to work from dawn as well. When the spring break ends, would I be able to return to the normal days when I wake up every morning to go to school?

This rooftop was quite cramped and was surrounded with a wire fence. Only a lone rack for drying clothes could be seen on the six meter area. Further at my right, a small silhouette appeared in the dim light.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, you’re so slow.”

Major didn’t even raise his head when I walked near. While munching on the German sausage in his hands, he kept his eyes glued to the telescope that was aimed downwards, and used his free left hand to adjust the wheel. The five small screens arranged in an arc around his feet became a faint source of light.

“I went to Alice’s place first.”

“Why didn’t you come here directly?”

“Because Alice made a 3D model of Kusakabe Masaya’s face with a simulation software, and even forced me to remember what he looks like from the side and the top.”

As for why Alice has such a high tech-program, I heard that it’s because it was stolen from a research lab from some company.

“Oh, I see. That is indeed a mission that is suited for Vice Admiral Fujishima. Although I’m still worried because you’re in charge of this.”

Major finally stood up after saying that, leaving me sitting on the floor while surrounded by monitors. In front of the telescope, there was a twenty four hours supermarket at a corner of the junction, the red and blue lights of the neon light illuminating the city at night. Though it was already past midnight, the flow of customers going in and out did not stop.

“Someone saw Kusakabe Masaya there?”

It was somewhat distant from the station, but it is still in the same district.

“That’s right. There were two witnesses, so it’s worth a look. Running away from home and hiding in this area, these twenty four hours shops are indispensable.”

“But why did we get the information so quickly? Didn’t we give the photo to Yondaime just yesterday?”

“They distributed the photo to the NEETs in the city, and they’re usually quite free.”

How many hundreds of NEETs are there in the city? While gazing at the late night crowd though the telescope, I thought to myself. These people are idle all day, and they form a strong network of contacts after being handled by Yondaime.

“Even so, do we have to start from late night?”

“You just think from Kusakabe’s point of view. If he’s really hiding in this area, if he wants to buy something, he would probably do so at dawn, when there are less people.”

I was about to say: If he chose to do so at late night when nobody’s out, it’s easy for the shopkeeper to remember his face, so he would avoid it; but I didn’t want to be misunderstood that I said that just because I wanted to continue sleeping, so I shut my mouth.

“Then let’s start the discussion. This is a system that can do the spying work of six people with just one person, and as humans only have two eyes, you’ll have to depend on your determination to increase it.” I’d be a psychic if I can do that……

Major proudly explained the locations that have a spying device on it and the method to control the focal length of the camera lens, saying something like: “From now on, Vice Admiral Fujishima might take part in these spying jobs more often, so you can just use this chance to get used to its method of operation!” It is said that he made these high tech devices personally, and I could only feel pity for him to waste his talent.

“What is this string for?”

There were wool threads tied to each monitor and the stand of the telescope, while the end of the strings were tied together and vanished in Major's backpack.

"Oh, that is used for packing up all the tools in an instant to run away if someone reports that there are suspicious people on the rooftop and the police appears. You can just pull on this, and all of the things would pulled into the backpack."

"Wa- wait a minute, you're using this rooftop without permission?"

"Duh, who can you ask for permission anyways?"

That's not wrong, but…….

"But there's only one entrance, how can I escape then?"

"If you're in a pinch, just jump down from here. Don't worry, you won't die if you're patriotic."

I'll definitely die if I jump down!

"It's okay if Vice Admiral Fujishima dies in battle, but please take care of the devices. Break a leg. I'll go set up the spying devices now. I'll change shifts with you after four hours."

After saying a whole lot of irresponsible words, Major disappeared into the building. I really feel that he's rather active this time.

So that it would be easier to contact people in an emergency, I took out my phone and placed it beside the telescope stand, then erected the collar of my jacket and started to stare at the screen. Although it was already April, it was still exceptionally cold on the rooftop at night because of the wind. The light of the monitor shone on my face, and I suddenly thought of the incident on the dawn of that day when I squatted down. It happened on a rooftop as well.

The words that Alice dug out from the grave— the words that Ayaka left.

They are still burned in my mind.

I tried to focus my attention on the faces of the pedestrians, but I couldn't do it.

I recalled Ayaka's face, the face that was devoid of happiness, sorrow or even anger, lying weakly on the bed in the hospital.

I wonder where Ayaka is right now.

In the depths of the eyes that were open wide, was Ayaka's soul really in there?

It's useless even if I think more about it. No matter where she is, it's impossible for her to return, and I don't even have the courage to visit her now.

✻

The monitoring job is really tougher than what I first thought. One of the members of Hirasaka-gumi, Major and I had to take shifts of four hours each; but the four hours of sitting did not get us any new information, and time felt as though it was as long as the winter break. Drinking the canned coffee alone after changing shifts, its tasted like I was drinking newspapers.

Even so, I really think that this job really suits me. That's because I don't have to think of what I can do and so on.

The third time changing shifts— Tuesday, a whole day after we started working, I felt like an empty shell. Not only my body, even my eyes don't have the energy to move anymore, so I could only repeatedly eat and drink. The plastic bag of a convenience store was stuffed full of the packaging of onigiris and sandwiches.

On my retina that had almost turned into a machine, silhouettes going here and there were reflected from the screens and the telescopes. Monitoring the people in a state of blankness might be more effective instead—

As it seems like something is happening.

My consciousness was gradually pulled back to the rooftop before dawn, like it was struggling to slowly drift to the surface of a bottomless swimming pool.

I wasn't sure how I stopped spacing out at first. There wasn't even a shadow of a person on the screens, so I hurriedly looked through the telescope to observe in more detail. A few people could be seen moving in the range of the shop, two workers were squashing a large amount of cardboard boxes behind the vegetable area, while another worker was behind the counter. And also—

No, it's impossible. I focused my whole attention to look at the face of the man who was paying his bill at the counter, from the side. The man in the photo I saw was not wearing glasses, unlike this man, and he was wearing a baseball cap too, making him look even younger. What is he buying? I increased the magnification of the telescope to the max— So it's a kitchen knife, and…… hair gel? No, is it deodorant? Envelopes, a small item placed in a plastic box, and a lot more odds and ends.

Seeing the man walk out of the door after paying his bill, I felt even more certain of it. Other people would not notice it even if they put in more effort to see, but I was very sure of it.

That man is Kusakabe Masaya.

The man walked to a trash can near the shop, took out an item from his bag, tore apart the packaging and threw it; I realized at that moment that it was a disposable battery used for phones. Now I get it, I recall that the yakuza said that he was asking around about something on the phone.

I never would've thought that we could really find this person by just monitoring a shop. Kusakabe's silhouette was shown on the leftmost part of the monitor. Although I immediately focused on him, he vanished from the screen very quickly. I stood up— I can't stay here anymore, for fear of losing his trail.

Sprinting out of the door and running down the stairs of the building, I couldn't see Kusakabe Masaya's silhouette by the time I reached the junction. I ignored the red light of the traffic light, rushing in a slanted path to the slope. As the lights of the store could not shine on here, the streets were suddenly plunged into darkness. I saw a silhouette with the corner of my eye, and I immediately chased the person to the alley after running through the road. The sounds of exhaust engines became fainter and fainter. I quickened my steps, going forward on the cold asphalt road. Did he really walk towards this direction? Actually, the silhouette of the man was long gone, so I could only chase him by intuition.

Turning left after going past a few corners, a bone-colored wall appeared in the darkness. It was the sound insulating wall of a construction site; the folding door opened merely thirty centimeters or so.

I tried to have a closer look, and saw that the signboard that should

have the names of the construction unit and project had rusted long ago, while the words on it were indiscernible.

I stealthily poked my head to the other side of the wall. I couldn't have a good look as it was too dark, only the uneven ground could be seen. There wasn't any large machinery in the construction site, and only a temporarily built hut made of steel plates was at the right corner of the site. It looks like there was some movement at the other side of the window.

Is it there? Though it looks like it's suitable to be used as a hideout…… But if that's just my imagination, what should I do? Besides, is that man really Kusakabe Masaya? I was getting more and more uncertain.

Ah, this is bad! I forgot Major's telescope, his monitors and the power generator on the rooftop. I have to go back.

Right at that moment— a faint noise drifted over.

Originally planning to leave, I stopped. The sound came from the construction site, and it seemed like it came from the hut.

I silently stared at the windows of the hut that was shrouded in darkness. A silhouette was moving in it.

There was someone inside.

I gulped, and stepped into the construction site. The feeling of the sticky mud felt like a swamp that accumulated soft darkness. I lowered my body and went closer to the hut.

This time, a clear voice could be heard.

"…… please. No, not in the country…… That's right. You probably have an account in Singapore, right…… I won't ask for all of the two hundred million, so please give me a hand."

The man said with a low voice.

Two hundred million.

It was Kusakabe Masaya. I found him. I actually found him!

Indeed, he hasn't left here yet, but why? I listened closely to the contents of the conversation with bated breath. He's probably on the phone, huh?

"…… No, it's the flight this weekend. Can't you help out with that….. Yeah. No, it's me who's asking too much from you. Sorry for bothering you at this time."

The voice stopped, and the person in the house tutted. Listening to the faint sounds in the silence, it seemed like an impatient Kusakabe Masaya pressing the buttons of his phone appeared before my eyes. It's luckier for you to have someone on the phone at this time. Even so, what in the world is he trying to do? Is he really planning to escape to another country? And he even mentioned Singapore too……

Unknowingly, my knees that were in a squatting position started to tremble slightly. What should I do? I never thought that I could even find him, much less how to handle it when I find him.

And I can't just barge in. He doesn't even know me, and just now— he bought a kitchen knife. Is that used for self-protection?

In the end, I could only think of calling Major or the others. I could just monitor him until reinforcements come, and I'll just let that person handle it. But I only realized in shock at that moment of my terrible mistake— I forgot my phone on the rooftop too.

Until a long, long time after that, I could still remember the mistake that I made. Does this count as a type of failure? If I didn't forget my phone, would the results be better? I don't know.

Anyways, I have to go back. I slowly walked through the muddy ground in a squatting position, then left the construction site.

Walking along the road that I came from, my leg tensed when I was passing through the road.

On the sidewalk opposite to the slope, three silhouettes were walking towards this direction. The streetlights dimly illuminated the purple flowery shirt that was overly conspicuous, and I immediately retreated behind the walls of the house behind me.

It was that guy— one of the two men who chased me at Hello Palace. Though I'm not sure about the other two, the person leading them is definitely that guy. I felt that my heart almost jumped to the bottom of my chin, while both of my legs were paralyzed.

"…… near here, close to the house of Kishiwada's old man." "Did he please his old man?" "Probably not?" "Is construction work still

done on the site?" "No, it stopped for quite some time now……"

In the silence, the contents of their conversation could be clearly heard. They're here for Kusakabe Masaya, it can't be wrong. I must inform him— tell him to run away quickly. But my legs couldn't move, as though they were sealed on the spot with cement.

On the other side of the road, the three passed by me. It can't be helped now. It's too late to hurry back now, even I would be noticed by them. If they notice me…… If even I was noticed—

I unknowingly squatted down, my hands tightly holding my thighs trembling violently. The footsteps of the three gradually disappeared.

I stood up and ran for my life. I almost fell down due to a loss of balance when sprinting madly down the slope, but I did not stop because of this. If the three went near him at the same time, Kusakabe Masaya would probably notice it, so it's okay, he'd be able to escape, so it's fine even if I don't go back and tell him. While running away, I thought of reasons to explain why I ran away. Each time my feet stomped on the asphalt road, the pain that spread to my gut made me feel like throwing up.

When I finally saw the lights of the twenty four hours supermarket, I stopped and hugged a tree beside the sidewalk, covering my mouth and swallowing the feeling of wanting to puke back into my stomach. Though I knew that no one was looking at me, I didn't feel like looking back.

As the feeling of wanting to puke gradually vanished, disgust at myself spread through my whole body.

Why did I run?

Why didn't I turn back and inform him even though I saw those people?

It was I who abandoned Kusakabe Masaya but it can't be helped, right? The opposing party is yakuza. What if the guy in the purple shirt remembers me? If I hurried back while Kusakabe Masaya had already escaped, and I was caught instead, wouldn't that be ironic? So it is better like this, that is—

I swallowed my bitter saliva, unsteadily walking past the junction while staring at my feet. The cars that drove on the road horned

loudly, driving past my back while brushing against the back of my hair.

When I returned to the rooftop, the monitors, telescope, backpack and my phone were still arranged neatly, awaiting my return. The screen showed the interior of the deserted shop, feeling as though it was blaming me.

I held back my tears that were about to fall and picked up my phone, dialing Alice's number after hesitating for a long time.

✻

"I didn't think that we would have trouble so soon."

Alice said coolly. The words that came into my ears along with the sounds of the cold wind from the air conditioner were extremely cold.

When I went back to the NEET Detective Agency, the sun was already up. Alice used her computer while sitting on the bed, completely ignoring me, who's squatting beside her.

"I sent a lot of things to Kusakabe Masaya's phone, accelerating the rate of battery drain. This method is effective, but it's both good and bad."

So she can use this kind of trick? This girl…… you really shouldn't make an enemy of her.

It's just that all of Alice's elaborate planning, Major's high tech devices and Yondaime's contacts, all of them were wasted by me. I hugged my knees and buried my face between my arms, the cold wind on the back of my neck hurting me. And we found him after so much effort……

"What is it? You've been as quiet as an overcooked hermit crab. You aren't thinking that it's because of you that Kusakabe Masaya was caught by the people from Tabara-gumi, are you? And you aren't even certain if he was caught or not."

"But, if I hurried back to find him……"

Alice finally turned her head over, frowning. Is she angry?

“Think about it calmly. Didn’t those people accurately walk to the construction site where he was hiding at? So it’s probably the people who Kusakabe Masaya contacted who sold his hiding spot out to Tabara-gumi. Even if you hurry back and tell him……”

“I know that.”

“You have a higher chance of being noticed by those people. So your decision was correct, it’s just that the opposing party acted quicker than us. My response wasn’t quick enough, so don’t just shoulder my responsibility for the world.”

My decision, is correct?

So what? Being correct or not isn’t important.

It’s just that I ran away, so the end result doesn’t matter.

“Who says that it doesn’t matter?” Alice’s voice was quite stern: “Why are you so dumb? If even you were caught by Tabara-gumi, how do you think the matter would turn out to be? Until now, if you are still ignoring this to show your meaningless courage, then I’m firing you right this moment. Get out!”

My jaw dropped in surprise, and I stared at Alice, who was so angry that her face was all red.

“…… What are you doing? Why aren’t you answering?”

“Err…… I never thought that Alice was so worried about me.”

“Who says that I’m worried about you?” A pillow flew over. “Do you really think that I would be worried for your safety!”

“Well, didn’t you say that you were worried for my safety yesterday?”

“I was being sarcastic, idiot! You don’t even know that!”

For some reason, Alice started to throw empty cans and remotes at me with her face red. So she wouldn’t throw her dolls even when she’s that agitated…… Wait, why is she this angry anyways?

“A…… Anyways, I’m sorry, my apologies.”

I retreated to somewhere near the fridge while covering my head.

“I had enough! You’re a guy who’s so stupid that it’s unforgivable!”

As there wasn’t anything else near her that she could throw, Alice could only whack the mat repeatedly while her black hair swayed around.

“I’m really sorry……”

Though I wasn’t sure if I was in the wrong, I still apologized to Alice in a small voice. Alice turned her head to look angrily at the screen.

I collected the things that Alice threw over and picked out the trash, but Alice spoke again as I was about to place the remaining items onto her bed:

“If you were caught, a useless person like you would probably blab about Meo’s hiding spot and the fact that we’re helping her to investigate the matter with little effort from them. You should think of how terrible that would be.”

Ah…… She’s right. But that made me sound really useless.

Did Kusakabe Masaya really got caught? Major went to his hiding spot to have a look, but it was deserted, as expected. I should’ve at least confirmed if he got away successfully, then we could plan our next actions quickly.

“I requested Hirasaka-gumi to monitor Tabara-gumi’s office, and we have Major’s spying devices. If Kusakabe Masaya has really been caught, we would know immediately.”

Even though she had her back to me, she knew perfectly what I was thinking of.

Then, I finally realized the reason for my depression, and it wasn’t because of self-reproach for not saving Kusakabe Masaya.

It was because I never even thought about things.

What do I do if I find him? To what extent is my resolve to take part in things?

When I met the yakuza, if I ran away because I determined that returning to Kusakabe’s side would be dangerous, I might not feel so useless right now. In reality, it was just because my feet were

paralyzed in fear.

Yondaime's words were spot on. When people without strong resolve are present, it would just increase the others' burden.

This made me feel extremely useless. Maybe I really don't have the right to stay by Alice's side as an assistant.

I suddenly noticed Alice gazing silently at me.

"Hmph!" Instead of saying that she's angry, it's more accurate to say that it's a shy reaction. "You really are unbelievably stupid, actually thinking of this kind of thing."

…… Eh? Did I just talk to myself again? I was so embarrassed that I felt like dying.

"Okay, I get it, you're a useless person. Brainless! Coward! Fish brain! Working for a detective although you have no resolve, you have no right to be my assistant— are you satisfied?"

I was scolded for no reason. To Alice, the scolding that she gave me wasn't anything special.

"Though I don't know what Yondaime said to you, you can just feed the thing called realization to chickens. Have you forgotten what we should do?"

I was completely clueless to what Alice said at first.

"…… To catch Kusakabe Masaya."

"And to protect Meo. You actually forgot even though you're the one who suggested that, I'm speechless. Listen, nobody cares if you have strong resolve or not. It's better for you to confirm this for me if you have time to think about these meaningless things."

My worries were denied by her in just a moment, causing me to be speechless. A photocopied paper flew to me, while I blankly stared at Alice for quite some time, even forgetting to pick up the paper.

"What are you spacing out for? If you want to make a performance of sleeping with your eyes open, then perform outside!"

"Ah…… Mnn, sorry."

I picked up the paper, and saw that it was densely packed with a

whole of what seemed like names of products, time and price.

"…… What is this?"

"It's the POS system list for the supermarket that you were monitoring. Large chain shops have the information of the items sold in the branches all over the country, so it's pretty easy to check."

Saying that as if it's so simple, normal people actually can't do that, can they? Reading the list in detail, that's right, all of the items recorded on it was the same as the ones on the receipt of the supermarket.

"What are the ones circled with red pen?"

Right after I said that, I realized the answer. The items Kusakabe Masaya bought were: a kitchen knife, an air freshening spray, envelopes, disposable chopsticks, disposable battery, thread and needle, lighter, scissors, bandage, and cellophane tape.

"This is……"

"As there was only one customer at that time, it's probably accurate; Those were the items bought by Kusakabe Masaya, right? Didn't you see him paying his bill?"

Alice finally turned her head over to look at me. I nodded in response. I did see things like a kitchen knife and something like a spray.

"But why did you check out what he bought?"

I saw a rare scene at that moment— Alice turned her head to a side and stayed silent.

She didn't answer for quite some time, so I couldn't help but tilt my head to look at the side of her face, then shifted my attention to the list of sold goods on my hands. What's with this? Did Kusakabe Masaya surprise Alice with the things that he bought?

"Oi…… Narumi……"

Alice finally spoke with a faint voice:

"In this case, I don't want to be the detective."

"…… Eh?"

I even thought that I heard wrongly. But a familiar, fragile light could be seen from her eyes when Alice looked at the bookshelf that was almost flat because of the weight of the machines on it.

"I've told you before, the detective that I meant is actually a representative for the deceased. As for Meo, she doesn't need that at all. Though there aren't any deaths yet, my fingers have already started to search for the words that would be lost. I detest myself like this, and I don't want to do that either. Actually, just thinking of the people who are alive would be enough— but I have no choice, my soul is constantly drawn by death. Protecting a person or saving a person, a NEET detective could never do that."

There's no such thing— was what I wanted to say. But seeing Alice's sorrowful expression, I couldn't speak my mind.

As for myself— what do I think about this?

Ayaka's words that were revealed by Alice that time.

Wouldn't it be better if I don't know about anything? I have thought about that a few times before. But it's because of Alice that I can do these things now. What would happen if I was kept in the dark about the truth? In short, is knowing or not knowing better? For me, who knows the truth, this fact could never be understood.

Even so, the person who pulled me out from a bottomless swamp was definitely Alice. I didn't know what to say. It is always at these critical times that I couldn't say a thing.

I continued to stay silent, then Alice spoke while looking at her side:

"Even though I am not sure if he was caught by Tabara-gumi, I have already started to imagine the sound of myself tapping on the skull of the dead. What was the sum of money used for? Why did Kusakabe Masaya ask Meo to run away with the money? Why did he hide himself? I am actually more afraid of the truth slowly rotting while being buried in the ground."

Alice used the mat to wrap her body, then turned around to face me. I could see that she wanted to force out a self-ridiculing smile, but failed.

“Are you thinking: Why don’t we just ask Kusakabe Masaya after we successfully rescue him? I really think that it’d be better if I could think like that, but the fate of a NEET detective is to connect with the world through death. So I could only frantically collect information, trying to reconstruct his words, guessing what he is thinking about.”

I should really interrupt, or Alice would continue to split hairs. So I tried to think of something to say—

“…… Then did you find out?”

But the question that slipped out was an idiotic question like that.

“I have my assumptions, but they have not been proven yet.”

“Maybe he wants to escape to another country? I remember that he mentioned something about a flight this weekend or something like that.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

I could not think of any other possibilities.

“Think about it, he stayed in the area even though he’s wanted by the Tabara-gumi, so he probably has a significant reason. So I tried to filter the information to find out the relationship between the surroundings of the construction site and Tabara-gumi, Hello Corporation, and even Kusakabe Masaya himself.”

“The problem is, do you know how many houses and buildings are located there?”

“After a thorough search of the related addresses and categorizing them, then using a searching program to record the data of the connections and distance, the end result appeared here.”

A second piece of photocopied paper flew over from Alice’s hands. It’s a simple, black and white map. The large, double circle in the middle is probably the construction site that Kusakabe hid at, and heading west from there— about two hundred meters from there according to the scale of the map, there was a place marked with a big star.

Eh? Isn't this near……?

"Isn't this the high class residential area?"

"That's right. A yakuza boss lives in this place marked with a star, and is handling a yakuza organization called 'Kishiwada-kai'. It is a luxurious mansion surrounded by surveillance cameras."

Kishiwada? Haven't I heard of this name before?

"This gang is a gang superior to Tabara-gumi. Which means, the boss of Tabara-gumi is an underling of Kishiwada-kai."

"Ah……" The three men who looked for Kusakabe Masaya seemed to have mentioned something about Kishiwada's old man, so they were talking about this.

"Which means Kusakabe Masaya's hideout is near the residence of a boss of a gang superior to Tabara-gumi. This matter cannot be handled so easily."

"Wait a sec, I'm a bit confused. Are you saying that the person who ordered the yakuza to look for Meo's father is among the top echelon of a gang superior to Tabara-gumi?"

"I am not sure about that. Tetsu is investigating the relationship between Kishiwada-kai and this case, and it is still unknown as to how deeply are they involved in the case; but they probably do have SOME connections."

Deliberately hiding near the house of a yakuza boss who's searching for himself? Why did Kusakabe Masaya do that? It's inexplicable.

"That's why I investigated the items that he bought."

Hearing Alice's words, I again shifted my attention to the paper in my hands.

The items that were bought at late night. Kitchen knife, air freshening spray, envelopes, disposable chopsticks, disposable phone battery, thread and needle, lighter, scissors, bandages and tape. What are these? The things apart from the battery baffles me. Buying a kitchen knife and a sewing toolkit, what in the world does he want that for?

Hmm?

“Buying a kitchen knife……”

Concealing himself near the house of his enemy, and he prepared a kitchen knife and scissors. Might that be……?

“He’s probably not that stupid, that’s your prejudice towards yakuza before this.”

Alice saw through my thoughts.

“Trying to assassinate the yakuza boss with just a kitchen knife, it’s meaningless as he would probably be caught before he even enters the house.”

“I can’t say that you’re wrong…… Then what’s with these things? What did he plan to do with them?”

“There’s actually another hypothesis about this, but I’ll keep it to myself for now since it’s too stupid. Though this possibility exists, it’s so stupid that going on a rampage with a kitchen knife would be better. Anyways…..”

Alice showed me a wry smile and shook her head:

“Anyhow, it’s meaningless now. Kusakabe Masaya’s objective couldn’t be achieved. This is only for a detective who’s stepping on his footsteps that collected dirty rainwater to go forward for his own self-satisfaction.”

✻

Walking out of the detective agency with a heavy heart, the sun was already high up in the sky.

I was still confused about a part of Alice’s words in my heart. It doesn’t matter if I’m resolved or not? What does that mean? It might actually make me feel better if she just reprimanded me for the mistakes that I made.

As I was about to walk down the stairs, I bumped into Meo who was holding a paper bag. I was startled, and stopped while shifting my gaze. After something like this happened— we lost news of her father that we located painstakingly. This made me unable to face Meo.

“Ah, Mr. Assistant. You came back from Miss Detective’s house this morning too?”

Please don’t say that! You’ll cause a misunderstanding.

I was frantically thinking of other topics that didn’t involve Kusakabe Masaya when I suddenly saw the clothes and towels in the paper bag Meo was holding.

“Having a bath again?”

“Yeah, because Min-san asked me to just train Miss Detective to take baths herself. It’s like she’s her mother.”

Yeah, Min-san is practically Alice’s mother right now.

“If I marry, I want to give birth to children as cute as Miss Detective.”

“What……!?”

Would that be fine? Though I might not be able to marry and have kids, even if I got married somehow, I wouldn’t want children like Alice. They’d hate eating and be fussy, so it would be hard to raise them.

“That girl is in a terrible mood right now, so she’ll go on a rampage if you ask her to take a bath. It’s better if you wait for about ten minutes! She’s really a troublesome kid……”

I learnt something recently, Alice is more dangerous if she feels downcast than when she feels excited. But it seems that the condition would improve after using the computer for awhile.

“Don’t you like kids, Mr. Assistant?”

“It’s not like I don’t like them……” and I’m a kid as well.

“My mother passed away when I was six……” Meo started on the topic while sitting on the stairs. “The sisters who live in the same building took care of me, because dad was usually out because he’s busy. I like a lively atmosphere, so I’m going to have loads of kids after I marry.”

“…… marry your father?”

Ah, that’s bad! I tried hard to steer clear of this topic, but I, myself,

broached it.

“Yeah, with dad.”

And she even answered that immediately. Do you even know how to get kids? Do you think that you can just pick kids from a cabbage farm?

“I know that, the sister taught me how to. Do you know? Calculating the ovulation date isn’t a method of birth control, but to ensure fertilization; Hiro-san taught me that.”

“UWAAAA!”

I hastily covered Meo’s mouth. What did that gigolo teach Meo!? Small girls shouldn’t say those kinds of things outside in broad daylight!

“Though dad doesn’t say much, he probably likes liveliness as well. So I’m going to be a mother, then give birth to lots of kids.”

“…… is that so. Then do your best to raise your children.”

I started to think blankly, this is another person’s life anyways. Being able to have this kind of life might not be half bad, and it seems to be more normal anyways.

But her target is Kusakabe Masaya…… Is that really okay? He’s an ex-yakuza who let his daughter face danger while he ran far, far away.

“If I let them drink the soft drink with the special taste, would they look like Miss Detective?”

“That’s impossible!” I should say that it’s an act of child abuse.

“Are you an only son, Mr. Assistant?”

“Do I look like one?”

“Yeah, you look like you don’t have any family members.”

Actually, she was half right. I sat down beside Meo and said:

“I live with my sister.”

“Then what about your father and mother?”

I gave the same answer for this particular question that many people would ask:

“My dad is almost never at home, while my mother passed away.”

Observing the response of the other people when I answer is actually one of my small hobbies. When sneaking a peek at Meo’s face, I saw that she looked as though she was about to cry. What a moody girl.

“…… Was it because of an illness?”

“Mnn? Oh, no…… I don’t know.”

“How could you not know?”

“It means that my mother’s passing away is somewhat muddled in my mind. Though the funeral had been held, I don’t really remember the details on that day. So actually I don’t really understand the reason for her death.”

“…… I don’t really understand what Mr. Assistant is saying.”

Really. I didn’t feel like explaining, so I brushed it away with a smile.

“Won’t you feel lonely? Not having your father or mother by your side……” Nobody ever asked me that directly, so I was rather surprised at her question and couldn’t answer. Why does Meo care so much about these tiny details?

“…… I don’t know, I never thought about it. Basically, having parents wouldn’t mean that I wouldn’t be lonely, right?”

I actually said something like that. As expected, Meo showed me an expression that told me that she wasn’t sure if she should smile wryly, and lowered her head. It’s just because of that, that the people around me would stay away from me.

Meo buried her face into the large towel, then said after “Mnnn”-ing:

“Did I tell you that my dad was a yakuza before?”

“A little.”

“When dad was drunk, I often asked him why he quitted being a

yakuza. Then he told me something. He said that he grew up at a youth centre, but the youth centre closed down when he was in high school. After that, he became a jobless person, and met people from a gang when he was hanging out in the streets, so he asked them to let him join."

She wanted to say why her father isn't a yakuza anymore, but Meo started to explain from Kusakabe Masaya's background.

"Do you know? It is said that yakuza is like family. The boss is like their parents, and the people who join first would be big brothers."

"…… Yeah, I know that."

The people in Hirasaka-gumi truly consider Yondaime and even Tetsu-senpai and Hiro as their family, that really makes me somewhat envious.

"Dad said that it was because of this that he joined, because he thought that he would have a lot of family members after he entered the gang. But when his rank increased, he realized that all of them were lies. He said that they were only concerned about money."

The sorrowful moral of the story of the modern chivalrous person is that money is thicker than blood.

"He had a row with them after that, so he left the gang to have a break. He went to many countries nearby, and he met mom at Thailand in the end."

Deliberately going across overseas to search for family? Is that even possible……

"Then he married mom and came back to Japan, then the big sisters that dad came to know in his travels came to Japan one after another with his help. Working in Japan is very toilsome, right? To let these people work more freely, he cooperated with Mikawa-san that he came to know in Japan, to open a company."

Was he that popular? He's an ex-yakuza who's near forty now.

I could not imagine Kusakabe Masaya's life as well. Predicting his thought would not only be unbeneficial, it made me more and more confused instead.

“So he brought me, who’s about five at that time, to Japan. I think Dad wants more family members, including a wife and kids; he’d feel happy if only he can stay with his family.”

Is that really so?

If he really values his family, then why did he run away while not letting Meo contact him? In the end, he should never have let his daughter get involved in such a dangerous matter. Is the two hundred million that important? Isn’t that the pressure of money that he hated the most?

And there’s another thing that I don’t understand.

Should I verify it?

I decided to ask.

“…… Meo, do you have a visa?”

“Visa?” Meo tilted her head. “For Japan? Of course.”

“I don’t mean that, I meant a passport for going overseas. For instance to Singapore.”

“Why? I don’t have any plans to go overseas, I've never been there.”

She’s right.

Kusakabe Masaya mentioned a flight on this weekend. Which means — he wants to abandon Meo and run away? A bad premonition surged into my head. Letting his daughter hide with a large sum of money, but he doesn’t seem to be interested in where she is hiding. Is he trying to make her the bait? To reduce the people chasing after him, so he left his daughter with a large sum of money then ran away. A hypothesis that is far from reassuring, but it’s terrible of him if things are really like that.

“What of a passport?”

“Nothing, sorry.”

“Did something happen with dad? You’re acting strange since just now.”

It looks like it’s really easy for me show my emotions on my face.

If so— should I just tell her directly? Even if it would hurt her, but the hurt would be less than when she found out through her father.

"…… I found your father."

"Really!? Where is he?"

Meo's face was full of smiles, and I could not bear to look at her.

"I don't know. Because……. Something happened…… we made some mistakes, so we lost his trail again."

I really couldn't mention the fact that he might already been caught by the yakuza, and it wasn't even confirmed. Meo's expression changed again like the eyes of a kitten.

"Is he still okay?"

"Yeah."

A wonderful smile bloomed on Meo's face.

"That's great……"

And there were even tears glistening in the corner of her eyes. Should Meo really be worried for a father like this? In contrast with Meo's joy, my feelings sank into a bottomless pit.

"I think your father probably wants to run away from the country."

I glanced upwards, only to see Meo cocking her head.

"He mentioned something like that on the phone, so he probably wants to ask someone he knows to clear things up. And he didn't contact you."

"So?"

"I think he wants to leave you here."

"It's impossible— he wouldn't."

Meo's face became pale, but she didn't rebuke me immediately like last time. Probably because I really did find Kusakabe Masaya this time?

I probably said something rather cruel that time.

“Think of this calmly. Your father did have a phone, so it’s not that he couldn’t receive your phone call, but he didn’t. He didn’t even planned to contact you.”

“Mr. Assistant, did you speak with Dad? Did dad say that to you?”

Meo tightly held my arm, and I shook my head. I should’ve walked in directly to look for him, I should’ve complained to Kusakabe Masaya because of him abandoning his daughter, but I didn’t have the courage.

“Dad would not abandon Meo!”

“Then why didn’t he pick up the phone!? Don’t you feel something off about this? It’s him who didn’t contact you!” I unknowingly raised my voice.

“You don’t know what kind of person dad is!” Meo answered me in a raised voice as well: “Why did you say that? Did dad say that? No, right? You didn’t talk to dad, right?”

That’s right. It’s because I was a coward, so not only did I not talk to him, I ran away without seeing his face because I was afraid of the reinforcements. What do you know? Do you really know how dangerous the world that your dad had a foot in is? All of a sudden, my anger almost leaked out, so I could only bite my lips to refrain from talking.

When I came to my senses, Meo was staring at me while covering her mouth. I might have blurted that out already, I’m really a big idiot.

“Sorry, but, it’s just that……”

Meo’s voice became unsteady. Though I knew she wasn’t blaming me, her expression made me feel hurt.

— Then what do you want me to do?

There is only one answer, to find Kusakabe Masaya; find him even if we have to tie him up and bring him to Meo. I don’t care if the truth is as Meo believes, but if he is really trying to abandon Meo, we have to stop him even if we have to use brute force. I tightly clenched my fists on my knees. We found him after so much effort, we almost had him in our hands, just because of me…… because of me—

“Mr…… Assistant?”

Meo’s voice seemed somewhat frightened.

Probably because my expression was too scary?

I stood up and walked down the stairs without even looking back. Actually I wasn’t feeling impatient because of Meo, but I didn’t understand until that time.

✻

Major was standing at the kitchen backdoor. He glanced at me, then said: “Don’t mind it so much, being able to locate his whereabouts is already quite good.” Even Major consoled me now, I feel so ashamed.

Then Tetsu-senpai appeared too, and the two started to check out the contents of the recordings from the spying device.

“Err…… I’ll help out too. Three people would be triple the speed.”

Major took off his earphones and stared at me with a disbelieving expression, while Tetsu-senpai just rolled his eyes, as if he wanted to say something.

“What’s with you, Vice Admiral Fujishima? It’s rare to see you so motivated. Are you sick?”

“No…… Is that alright?”

Though I felt angry because of my own helplessness, the things that I could help out with aren’t much, after all. So……

“I don’t really mind, but don’t leave anything out.” Major handed a pair of earphones to me.

Using the power of three people to listen to the contents of the half day recording, we still used up more than two hours to finish listening to them. Major revealed that this job is actually the most tiring of them all.

“The one that Vice Admiral Fujishima listened to is a more recent one. Did they say anything about Kusakabe Masaya?”

“Not at the moment.”

Talking about preparations of visas, having a shareholders’ conference, the schedule of next month’s conferences and so on, the conversations involved some deep contents, but they just didn’t mention Kusakabe Masaya. Knowing of how tiring this job is after doing it, I started to regret taking the initiative to help out.

“It’s strange. It seems that he wasn’t brought to the office, while Hirasaka-gumi, who’s on monitoring duty, don’t have any news as well.”

“Maybe he wasn’t caught?”

Tetsu-senpai took off his earphones.

“Tabara-gumi has only one office, so they probably didn’t bring him there…… No, it’s hard to say, and he might be imprisoned in a warehouse somewhere.”

“Tetsu-san, did the Kishiwada-kai take any action? Their place is quite big, so there are probably a lot of places to imprison a person.”

“No. Though they know about this, the one taking actual action are only the people from Tabara-gumi. We just don’t know their relationship with Hello Corporation, since not many people know of the internal matters about other gangs. If I had known this earlier, I should’ve got acquainted with more members of Kishiwada-kai.”

“But Tetsu-san, don’t you hate those enterprising yakuza?”

“Idiot, I hate them as long as they’re yakuza.”

So there are many types of yakuza…… What a confusing world, and the topic of the conversation steered to an eerier side. The days when I went to school seriously seemed to have went further away from me (and it’s the same in reality, as I almost never attended during the third semester) , I wonder how my classmates are right now. I’m fine today as well, and is currently listening to a recording of yakuza’s phone calls.

“Okay, since there’s no new information from the yakuza, maybe we can take action from the company. We’ll have to wait for news from Hiro then.”

Hiro appeared at about two in the afternoon.

“Sorry, I’m late. I heard all about it, thanks for your hard work. It’s lucky that Narumi wasn’t caught too. Have you guys found him already?”

I gave the seat of the large steel bucket to Hiro, while I sat beside Tetsu-senpai on the stairs.

“There isn’t any news from the office. How about you? Have you seen the secretary?”

Secretary?

“Ah, yeah, up till morning. It’s so tiring, I had to go back to have a nap, too. Though the secretary is somewhat cute, our topics of conversation didn’t really match.”

Yet another incomprehensible world. Accompanying the secretary till morning?

“The secretary of the Director of Hello Corporation. Though her job is officially a secretary, she’s actually just a clerk working part time, as the company is small.”

Hiro sat on the large, steel bucket, and handed a long, silver object to Major from his pockets. So it’s an IC recorder. Major connected the recorder to the computer.

“Did you get any new information?”

“Yeah, quite a lot. I’d like to edit it somewhat before handing it to Alice. Can you play it?”

“Edit?” I interrupted from the side.

Hiro wanted to answer me, but he stopped as the contents of the recorder started to play. At first, the noise of conversation and what seemed like the piano accompaniment of a jazz music, sounds of glass bumping into each other. Probably it’s a bar or some place like that?

‘Are you alone? Can I sit beside you?’ It’s Hiro’s voice.

‘Eh? Ah, o- okay.’

The voice of the young woman seemed to be somewhat surprised.

‘Listening to music while sitting here is the best. Didn’t someone play ‘April in Paris’ just now? It’s April right now too, and I wanted to play the songs, but someone picked it first, surprising me quite a lot.’

‘Eh— ? Haha.’

Ohhhh…… So he hits on girls like this! I couldn’t help but to be somewhat touched, though I’d probably be unable to do that.

“Hiro, you seem to be quite knowledgeable about jazz music.”

“Not at all. I just asked the bartender in advance.”

Speechless.

“Major, can you fast forward? The content in front isn’t related to the case.”

After fast forwarding the recording, a blissful voice suddenly came from the speakers of the computer when we played it again.

‘…… Hiro, you’re quite strong. Though your legs are so slender, heh heh. You gave me quite a fright when you picked me up and took me into the bathroom to have a bath!’

“No such thing, it’s because you’re light.’

Wait a sec! Just a little time had passed, and what happened!? Where is this!?

“Abducting her into a hostel after sweet talking her ten times per second, as expected of Hiro.”

“It’s probably because you hit the fast forward button.”

“But you don’t need to go to a hostel, do you?” Tetsu-senpai said.

“Not really, I’m just going along the flow.”

What do you mean by going along the flow? You……

“Fast forward a bit more. Ah, yeah, about this part.”

As I was frantically thinking of how to interrupt, the voice of the lady made me focus my attention on the speakers.

'…… going on a vacation is great, I want to go too— best to a place where there are hot springs. Play at Fuji Q Highland, then bathing in the hot springs and staying for the night! Is that okay?'

'The haunted hospital attraction there is very scary, I'd like to go once. I'm free anytime, how about you? How about we go there for a four days three nights stay in the Golden Week?'

'Ahh— our company doesn't even let us take a break during the Golden Week, it's so disappointing!'

Tetsu-senpai and Major came closer as the conversation started to enter the main topic.

'…… they owe a lot of debts, so I thought the company would close down last year. Then— I thought that I could leave after the company closes down, but then the Director put in quite a lot of effort to save the company. I really don't know what happened, maybe he won in a lottery?'

The debts of the company— disappeared?

'But if the company closes down, won't your retirement pension vanish into thin air?'

'Ah, you have a point. Oh yeah— then isn't it better if I just leave right now? The company might have even more debts after this.'

'It's possible. Why don't you be a NEET like me? Then we'll go have a trip for two weeks.'

'Haha, that doesn't seem bad. Ah, look at that, there's a trip to Italy, and it says here that it's a twelve day trip.'

The sound of someone rummaging papers could be heard aside from the conversation, maybe they're reading magazines?

'But going for so many days, we'd have a lot of luggage. I'm really jealous of other people for being able to go for a vacation with a large bag, but I always feel lazy every time I get to the place where they sell the luggage bags. I'm thinking if I should buy them on shopping channel…… Ah, this Boston bag seems to be nice, I might be able to put in a month's worth of clothes.'

'…… Eh? I've seen this bag before.'

I stared at Hiro in shock. What in the world happened?

“Aside from Meo’s bag, I planted a traveling magazine in the room of the hostel, pretending that someone else forgot it. You can’t ask these questions directly, so I used a lot of effort to get on the topic.”

Hiro smiled wryly. I’m really speechless. I always have this thought, it’ll be so much better if he uses his efforts on other matters—

‘Didn’t I mention the vice-chairman of our company just now?’

‘Yeah, the ojisan who’s rather bad.’

‘That’s right, he’s somewhat handsome actually. I heard that he was a yakuza before this. On the day when he pays us our wages, he would bring the bag to the company, then when someone calls that day, he would go home directly after going out with the Director. Those two are really troublesome, never leaving a message as to where they went. I wish the Director would be more understanding, I have to answer a whole lot of phones about them too, really! Vice-chairman, too. He skipped work for the whole week. Maybe he went for a vacation?’

Unknowingly, my palm started to sweat. The conversation entered the critical part, and this could be seen from Tetsu-senpai and Major’s excited expression.

As Yi Ling-san said, the bag would be brought to the company on a regular basis. Then the phone— where did it come from? I listened closely to the conversation coming from the computer speakers. The conversation ended without involving the case. Then, only shuffling sounds came from it, and the voice of a blissful lady.

“Ah, sorry, this part ends here, because the second round is going to start.”

“You pervert!” “Stupid hustler!” “Public enemy of females!” “Sex offender!”

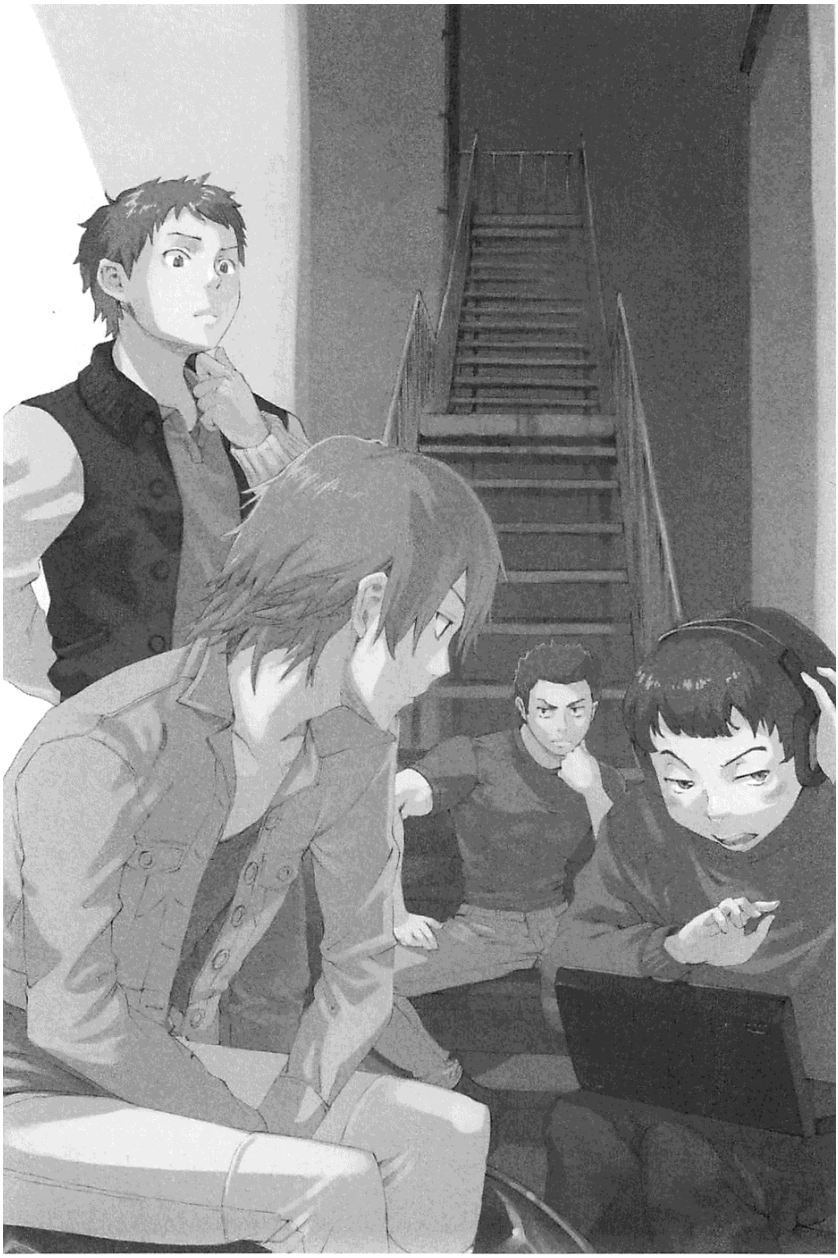
Tetsu-senpai and Major criticized Hiro in turn. As for me, I both admired Hiro’s actions, and also felt an inexplicable sorrow. These people are so strange…… Though I understand that, but there’s really no room for me to say anything.

Am I just using the name of an assistant to get closer to these people?

“Oh yeah, Major, can you edit out this part?”

“This is truly unsuited for Alice’s ears, it’d have a bad influence on her sex education.”

“Though I know a lot of things, but then things that I don’t understand pop up as well.”



Tetsu-senpai crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“It seems like those aren’t the money of the company, so maybe it’s really money from yakuza?”

“It seems so, but why are they keeping the money for them?”

“And why did their debts disappear?”

“Anyways, Alice would get these things clear.”

Major said in a sure voice.

“Having regular phone calls every time they pay wages, huh? Since the area of investigation is so small now, the rest is just to investigate their phone logs.”

“Ah…… That’s right!” Hiro answered.

Just like that, the threads have been connected.

Hello Corporation, Tabara-gumi, and Kishiwada-kai, possibly a gang superior to Tabara-gumi.

"But that doesn't mean that we found Kusakabe Masaya." Tetsu-senpai said while frowning: "We can now get news from the yakuza, but we must still locate Kusakabe Masaya."

That's true. After all, we don't even know if he's caught or managed to run away to some other place. If so, we have to launch a new investigation.

"The only thing that we can be certain of is, the person called Mikawa is deeply involved in this matter, so we should test him."

"We'll let Hiro and Major handle that."

"That's fine, so we can finally take action--"

At that moment, Min-san's angry roar came from the shop.

"Shut up. I told you that I don't know! Get lost if you're not here to eat!"

I opened the kitchen backdoor for about three centimeters and cautiously looked at the situation in the shop. Two tall men were standing at the entrance, glaring at Min-san behind the counter.

After seeing the face of one of them, I nearly cried out loud.

I subconsciously lowered my body, springing away from the kitchen backdoor.

"What is it, Narumi?"

Hiro asked me, and I signalled to him not to speak.

It's that guy. One of the two men who chased me at Hello Palace, the one with the leather coat. He was wearing the same clothes that he wore that day, which is why I recognised him immediately. The other one donned a dark gray suit, looking quite decent, but his dark brown sunglasses gave him an unusual presence. Why? Why do they know of this place? Were we followed? Surely not!

"Isn't this Hanamaru Ramen Shop? The phone number is xxx-xxxx, right?"

Leather Coat leaned his elbow on the counter, sizing Min-san up with a suspicious expression.

"That's right. So what?"

"She's a dark-skinned girl, fourteen, looking for her father. Do you know what kidnapping an underage girl means? Don't try to harbor her."

I heard someone gulp behind me. Indeed, they know that Meo is here.

"I don't know her. Lunch time is already over, so please go."

Min-san rebuked them fearlessly. I could clearly see veins appearing between the brows of Leather Coat, while Shades kept cool and silent.

"You bastard, don't pretend--"

At this moment, the footsteps came from the stairs.

"Ah, everyone is here! Miss Detective seemed to have fainted because of the heat from the hair dryer."

My heart nearly stopped at that moment. Though we immediately closed the kitchen backdoor, it was too late. Meo's clear voice caused the two yakuza in the shop to react, the two large

silhouettes appearing at the entrance between the buildings.

"Meo, get in!"

Hiro rapidly opened the kitchen backdoor, pushing Meo and I inside.

"You two hurry up and hide, don't be seen."

After hearing Min-san's voice, strong arms pressed my head under the counter, while Meo held my arm tightly behind me.

"Stop!"

Leather Coat could be seen walking into our territory from the crack of the door, while Tetsu-senpai was standing in front of him.

"Who are you people!?"

"That's what we would like to ask you."

Tetsu-senpai glared at the slightly higher eyes of the man in the leather coat. As for me, I hid below Min-san's hands, not daring to even move.

"We're here in Kusakabe-san's stead." Shades said in a low voice behind the other man: "We're here to get his luggage and his daughter."

"Why isn't Kusakabe-san here himself?"

"Oioioi, shouldn't you know? Kusakabe-san is a busy man."

Compared with the sneering Shades, Leather Coat obviously gets angry more easily.

"Get lost! We're not here to play!"

Tetsu-senpai blocked Leather Coat, who was about to walk in, with his muscular chest, while Leather Coat rammed Tetsu-senpai away with quite some force.

"Oi, Tetsu! Don't touch him!"

Hiro rushed forward and caught hold of Tetsu-senpai's hand. Leather Coat was also lowering his body, fists tightly clenched. I couldn't help but close my eyes and turn my head around to avoid

looking at this, then the sound of someone hitting flesh came to my ears.

I opened one of my eyes to take a look, and could not understand what was happening all of a sudden. Tetsu-senpai was evidently stopped by Hiro, but the leather coat man was still hugging his abdomen, kneeling on the soil ground for some reason. The sunglasses guy hit the leather coat man with his knees, that was what I learnt after quite some time.

"Don't hit ordinary citizens."

Shades stood behind the Leather Coat, then mercilessly kicked the back of the Leather Coat's head. With a thud, what sounded like the sound of bones cracking echoed between the buildings, causing myself to curl up. Blood and spit dripped onto the soil.

"Sorry for that, we didn't educate them well enough."

While treading on the back of Leather Coat who was lying on the ground, Shades showed us a cold, cruel smile.

"But can you tell me why Kusakabe-san's daughter is in your care?"

As his tone was much more polite, it pressured us more than Leather Coat. As Tetsu-senpai was about to answer, Min-san opened the kitchen backdoor and walked out. She pushed away Tetsu-senpai and Hiro, standing in front of the yakuza alone.

"We don't have anything to say to you, scram!"

"Hmmm."

Walking past Leather Coat, who curled up his body like a tortoise, Shades walked to face Min-san. Though she was glared at from a distance of five centimeters or so, Min-san was still unmoved.

"We're here at Kusakabe-san's request. It can be said that you people are kidnapping a teenager."

"Don't speak nonsense, bring her father if you can. You're probably just spouting nonsense, right? Her father is now missing. If you have anything to say, you can call the police."

"Oi oi, how do you think we would know of this place?"

Shades took out a black phone and swayed it in front of Min-san. I

nearly cried out loud.

"Missed calls log. What a dutiful daughter, calling him so many times."

Meo said that she called her father a lot of times, but nobody answered-- and she used the phone in the shop as well. Why? Why didn't I notice? Why didn't I realize this? My feeling right now is like the part of my body below my waist is buried in snow, while the blood flow to my brain is gradually lost.

Kusakabe Masaya was indeed caught by these people.

"Perhaps you should call the police? But if you call the police, you might not see Kusakabe-san anymore. He might just kick the bucket because of a sudden illness. I heard that their relationship is very good, so it'll be nice if they can meet alive."

After saying that, Shades turned around and stamped on Leather Coat's belly.

"How long are you going to continue to sleep? You'll trouble the shop owner!"

Shades continued before leaving:

"We'll come back and do business with you after this, so please take care of the girl and the luggage before that."

✻

"Sorry, sorry....."

Meo kept sobbing. Six people were stuffed in the living room of Min-san's house, Min-san sat beside Meo while I sat opposite to her. As there were only three chairs there, Tetsu-senpai and Hiro could only stand, while Major directly sat on the floorboard.

"It's not your fault, so it won't help things even if we blame you."

Min-san said to Meo coolly. It was like my heart had frozen over. Is this all my fault? Talking to Meo so many times, I should've noticed it earlier.

"Why didn't you tell me that even yakuza are involved in this?"

Min-san gave all of us a scolding. I covered my face, while Major stared at the ground with his body rigid; Hiro bit his lip with his head lowered, while Tetsu-senpai looked away with a displeased expression on his face.

"This Alice....."

Meo sniffed.

"I- It's better if I just move out, I can't trouble everyone anymore."

"Why are you moving out for? To look for those guys? You don't even know how they would treat you."

"Bu- But if I stay here....."

"Those guys don't dare to do anything. Didn't one of them hit his partner just now? That is a threat so that their opposing party would know that there's no difference even if they call the police. Because of the yakuza prevention laws, the yakuza wouldn't dare to take action in broad daylight, which is why they did that."

Min-san petted Meo's head. Meo was going to say something, but was stopped.

At that moment, the telephone at the entrace of the living room rang, giving me a huge fright. In the space that felt as if time had stopped, Min-san slowly rose, passed by my side then picked up the receiver.

Though I couldn't hear the contents, I seemed to be able to see Alice at the other side of the phone, sitting on the bed, hugging her knees, and with her face clouded.

"..... I'm okay. Promising to help without even thinking is my own fault."

This way of saying that felt even more hurtful than her directly blaming us.

Min-san's kindness is kind of cruel.

"Do you know of the current situation?"

Alice seemed to have said something, causing Min-san to glance at me. If Alice had her eyes glued to the surveillance cameras, she probably noticed what happened-- Kusakabe Masaya is already in

the hands of the yakuza. I lowered my head due to the hopelessness in my heart. It's my fault. At that time-- If I went back in time to warn him, then things wouldn't turn out like this now.

"Can we still do anything to deal with it? They're yakuza, you know."

'We don't have any choice but to continue. I'm a detective, and I accepted a request. There is no other truth that is stronger than this on Earth.'

The voice from the receiver, seemed to me like Alice forced it out.

Min-san turned her head around again, but did not look at me this time. I felt a strange heat from behind me. When I turned my head around, I saw that Major stood up unknowingly, Hiro and Tetsu-senpai were looking here as well. The eyes of the three recovered their previous gleam. I gulped. It was the same as that time.

"What do we do?" Min-san said, as if she deliberately wanted us to hear it clearly.

Alice answered in a forceful voice:

'We have to get Kusakabe Masaya back.'

Min-san put down the receiver, and said some vicious words: "What a bunch of idiotic kids."

"Erm..... It's, better if....."

"The time when we call the police is the time when you leave this place."

Min-san answered quickly, and grabbed Meo's collar as she was about to protest.

"Don't think that you would be okay if you go away. Didn't you say that you don't want to call the police? Don't you want to save your dad? Meo, you, yourself raised the stakes, so we can only follow or bet some more. If you choose not to follow, those guys would probably be very happy."

Min-san pressed the red-eyed, speechless Meo onto a chair.

"And Narumi, you shouldn't meddle in this anymore."

I raised my head to look at Min-san's face, unable to comprehend her words for the moment.

"Wh..... Why?"

I said in a somewhat sluggish voice.

"These guys don't matter, since they're NEETs without a future, but you're a high schooler! Don't you understand? They're yakuza!"

An inexplicable feeling was stuck in my throat. But I'm an assistant detective! There should be something..... something that I can help out with.

But I couldn't say anything.

I truly felt, when Leather Coat and Shades walked between the buildings, that my feet were trembling, unable to move. I only thought in my heart at that moment, hoping that Leather Coat would not remember my face-- what a shameful prayer.

I really don't know what to do, and suddenly felt like crying.

✻

The yakuza took action very quickly, and started to harass the shop from the evening that day. Four or five delinquents gathered outside the entrance of the store. Though the two from the afternoon weren't present, you could see what type of people they were from their appearance and hairstyle.

They're so old-fashioned, really....."

Though Min-san said that, she didn't really seem to mind it. They didn't enter the shop or cause trouble, after all. They just sat on the beer crates outside of the shop, sending messages on their phone or glaring at the pedestrians. It's quite thoughtfully planned business obstructing operation, and the effect is quite good, as the customers were too intimidated to enter.

Tetsu-senpai and I stayed outside the kitchen backdoor, but we could only look at their actions helplessly. It seemed to me that senpai wanted to go out and KO them at once, but he's just restraining himself. If he really did so, he would fall into their trap.

"Blast, these guys, these guys, these guys....."

While muttering to himself, Tetsu-senpai used his fist to hit his thighs repeatedly. The reason that he stayed, was to protect Min-san and Meo. Hiro told me to stay as well, probably because he's worried that senpai couldn't stop himself from hitting them if he's alone?

"Narumi, can I beat you up?" He actually said something like that.

"As you wish."

I answered randomly. Tetsu-senpai looked as if he was shot, and showed me a helpless expression:

"What's with you! You should just cooperate and do a tsukkomi, or I'll really beat you up!"

"I really feel like being beaten up."

But even if I ask other people to beat me up, my helplessness still can't be cured.

Tetsu-senpai sighed after looking seriously at my expression:

"I think you'd better go home."

"If I go back, there'll be nobody to stop you if you lose control."

"Oh, please. If I really lose control, how could you stop me?"

He has a point.

"It's not that, I meant that you don't need to worry. I wouldn't take action myself. Alice is collecting the videos of these people right now, and she would hand it to Yondaime. They would get people to follow them when these people go back. As for Hello Corporation, Hiro is on it, so we can get new information no matter what."

Is that so? Yakuza have a lot of strongholds, so locating Meo's father isn't a simple ordeal. Especially at this time, the harrassment would only increase.

Though I can't help out with anything, a bad prenomition kept expanding in my mind.

"Just go back. You always go home late recently, so your sister is

probably worried, right?"

That might be better. As I felt greatly ashamed of myself, it was like my body curled up in a ball.

Looking at the situation in Min-san's house before going home, I could only see Meo curled up in a corner, facing the outside while sitting in the corner of the study and holding the Boston bag in her hands. I couldn't tell if she was asleep, but it really isn't the time to talk.

When I walked out of the ramen shop, Min-san didn't say anything as well. So that the yakuza underlings gathered outside wouldn't see me, I chose to walk away from the back of the building.

Chapter 4

On Wednesday morning, a bitter taste like when I first took the drug remained in my mouth. I started my day with that unpleasant taste. As I couldn't sleep until three in the night, it was already half past eight when I woke up; my sister went to work ages ago.

Walking downstairs to the living room and turning on the television, the news, of course, weren't broadcasting the news that an ex-yakuza, currently the vice-chairman of a company, ran away with a large amount of cash. All of this started from darkness, and will end in darkness. To be honest, tragedies like this happening in the world, probably they happen more than someone being in the spotlight, right?

I blankly stare at the television screen that is playing a TV drama for about fifteen minutes, then changed clothes and walked out of the door.

The words that Min-san said yesterday were still echoing in my mind-- 'Don't meddle.'Yondaime told me something similar to that before, but I just couldn't stay at home, doing nothing.

✻

A dead alley was formed in front of Hanamaru Ramen Shop because of the not-too-tall buildings surrounding the shop, and it was so silent there that it's eerie. I parked my bike beside the main road, then inspected if there are any yakuza underlings in front of the shop, but I didn't even see the shadow of a kitten. There weren't even anyone in the windows and balconies of the surrounding buildings, but that might be just my imagination-- Isn't it like that usually? Nobody was outside drying blankets or mats, and there weren't any potted plants placed outside.

The only thing that remained was a yellow stain on the steel door of the ramen shop and the road in front of it. Going to check out the place because people thought that something happened there, only to see that the shop had been splashed with paint. What a malicious

way of harassment.

"Min-san, outside--"

When I pulled open the sliding door and was about to walk inside, Meo and Min-san raised their heads at the same time to look at me from the other side of the counter, causing me to be somewhat surprised. Min-san had taken off her sleeveless vest, leaving only her white sarashi wrapped around her chest. From her right shoulder to the side of her abdomen and her arm, all of them were stained with blood. Meo was helping her with cleaning up.

"What happened to you!?"

"I was ambushed when I was coming back from shopping!" Min-san answered while frowning. "I was too careless. If it were to be me from the past, beating up two or three of them should be easy."

Besides being shocked, I felt the flames of anger burning as well. A strong dizziness came upon me, making me feel as if the universe is warping.

"It's okay, they just pushed me a bit. And they ran away immediately as well, so it isn't anything serious."

"This is far from being okay!"

Meo answered in a crying voice. From cleaning the wound until bandaging it, Meo continued to cry.

"It's so noisy! You're not the one hurt, what in the world are you crying for!"

"But, it's because of me....."

"It's not your fault. Listen, it's obviously the fault of those guys. Making you feel that it's your fault, that's their aim. So don't think like that!"

I thought to myself, why is this person so tough? While I- I--

Min-san turned her head over after hearing the sound of the kitchen backdoor opening.

A young girl wearing pajamas stood in front of the door, staring at the not-completely-bandaged, painful-looking wound on Min-san's body with widened eyes, causing her white skin to appear even

paler than usual.

"Hikikomori? What are you doing here?"

Min-san said in a forced voice, while Alice stayed silent. Her upper torso trembled slightly all of a sudden, and I immediately ran into the kitchen past the counter, holding onto Alice before she collapse.

"Narumi..... Sorry."

Alice held me tightly while trembling non-stop and said:

"I saw that Master coming back drenched with blood, so I came to verify the blood that flowed because of my own stupidity and idiocy, and also to confirm my own helplessness....."

"I'm not here for your viewing pleasure, so just stay obediently in your room, idiot."

Min-san heaved a long sigh after saying that and sat on the the round chair. At the instant when she sat down, I saw her frown because of pain.

"This isn't..... Miss Detective's fault."

Meo shook her head while wiping away her tears.

"Meo, it's alright, this girl is an incurable idiot, so our statements just now is useless to her. She thinks that all of the misfortunes that happens in the world is due to her being unable to solve them."

Min-san said half-jokingly. But I understand that to Alice, that wasn't a joke, but the truth. All of the sorrow in the world is because of her own helplessness-- and this caused Alice to play the role of a detective. My hands that were supporting Alice tightened subconsciously.

"I checked the contact log of Hello Corporation. I finally understand."

The words that slipped out of Alice's mouth were such hollow words.

"What do you understand?" Min-san asked expressionlessly.

"The source of the money, the things that Hello Corporation did, and the reason that Tahara-gumi and Kishiwada-kai are involved in

this. The only thing that I cannot understand is, what was Kusakabe Masaya trying to do?"

I breathed in.

"It's only when everything is too late, when the veil of mystery is uncovered. Sitting alone in an empty cinema, such is the role played by a detective. Even so, I still have to say this..... Are you willing to listen?"

"Suit yourself."

"Narumi, please give me a chair. This matter is somewhat complicated."

The delicate Alice hugged her knees while sitting ont the round chair, and started to explain the complicated story that she spoke of.

"Hello Corporation is like a large filter, which is why many people who dirtied water approached them."

I placed both of my hands on the table and cocked my head. I have absolutely no idea what she just said.

"Have you heard about 'money laundry'?"

"Somewhat." Min-san answered, while Meo wore a mystified expression on her face. Actually, I'm not too sure as well, but the only thing that I could understand is that this is probably more serious than defalcation.

"Simply said, that means to launder dirty money, allowing them to be used legally."

"I still don't really understand, are there dirty money and clean money?"

This is also the part that I didn't understand. Alice 'Hmmm'-ed while looking at the ceiling, then continued to explain:

"Then I'll explain from the beginning. There is a simple way that people can easily evade tax. Do you know how, Master?"

"How would I know? Do you think that my shop is a famous shop that needs to evade tax?"

"You have a point. But please remember this, it's really very simple-- not reporting the money earned, and 'absolutely not using them'. That's all."

As Alice stopped explaining after this, I asked after thinking for awhile:

"But then..... Wouldn't the meaning of earning money be lost?"

"That is correct, but tax evasion is mainly about this point-- how to pretend that they didn't earn money, then pretend they don't have money to spend."

"Then, is money laundering the same as tax evasion?"

"Not so, it's just that money laundering can launder the money from tax evasion, and can also purify the money that cannot be released to the public, such as income from drug dealing and so on; the basic concept is similar to tax evasion. To understand the need for money laundering, you have to first understand two concepts-- the first one is 'there is no meaning if money is not used', as for the second point, as the tax collection department in our country is very outstanding, so 'as long as someone is using money for certain purposes, they will sniff it out immediately'."

"..... Are they really that outstanding?"

"Of course they're outstanding. Using a sum of money on meaningful things-- such as buying houses, cars, shares, investment-- these activities must be done where people can see them. If there is a large flow of money, the Tax Department would know of it immediately, then they will start to investigate the source of the sum of money."

According to Alice, these people seemed to be people with supernatural powers.

"Checking back on the flow of money, they will treat it as tax evasion if they found money that haven't been reported, then ask for additional taxes; if they found out that the money came from shady sources, the people would be arrested. That is why these people try not to let them know how the money is obtained."

"..... Then what do they need to do?"

"For instance, they can pay the money to foreign workers as wages,

which will then flow out of the country."

I breathed in.

I think Min-san probably had the same reaction.

"..... Is it Hello Corporation?"

"That's right, that is why they directly give cash to the workers. The tenants in Hello Corporation are mostly female employees who came here to work from other areas in Southeast Asia. Just like that, the company has another channel for money laundering. To the female workers, it is easier for them to stay in Japan through the arrangements of the yakuza and their company, so it's like killing two birds with one stone."

I sneaked a peek at Meo. She was already spacing out with her face pale.

"Kishiwada-kai probably gave financial assistance when Hello Corporation was established, and the money that they used was of course their dirty money. That is why they seem like they don't have any connections, it's just that Hello Corporation is doing the money laundering through Tabara-gumi. I investigated all the regular phone calls from the phone log, so it's definitely Kishiwada-kai who called them."

After saying that, Alice heaved a huge sigh.

It just feels-- This matter..... is already..... not something that we can handle.

"..... Do you have any proof?" Min-san asked calmly.

"No." Alice said expressionlessly. "If there's evidence, the government would have taken action already. All of these are my assumptions. Hello Corporation hid the matter quite well, and the only weakness of their money laundering is that it's not too efficient because of being much too careful. I've seen the savings that Yi Ling provided, and simply calculated the amount of money; No matter how I calculated, money of over a billion cannot be easily laundered. Since they didn't publicize it, their deeds were not brought to light; but since the money laundering was inefficient, they couldn't deal with the money that Kishiwada-kai gave them. In this situation, what do you think Director Mikawa who was troubled because of their large sum of debts did?"

The information that Hiro provided and Alice's explanations combined in my mind.

"He defalcated the money.....!?"

"That's right, the defalcation wasn't done by Kusakabe Masaya, but the Director himself-- as there's still two hundred million cash that couldn't be dealt with and was stored in a safe. I have no idea how he tricked Kusakabe, anyways, Mikawa used one hundred million to clear the company's debt, while the two hundred million left over is in the bag."

Kusakabe Masaya knew that he was framed, which is why he ran away. But why didn't he prove his innocence? No, he probably couldn't do so. The one who is close to Tabara-gumi was Mikawa, and Kusakabe Masaya once left a Kansai yakuza gang. If only the Tabara-gumi and Mikawa agreed to say that it was the fault of Kusakabe, the chances that Kishiwada-kai would believe them is very large. Yakuza and the police aren't the same, after all.

"The problem is we can't help out in this when we know it only now, so all of this is too late. The only thing that we can confirm right now is that Kusakabe is already caught by Tabara-gumi, and then-- he will be killed sooner or later."

Meo stood up, her mouth trembling slightly. Min-san stood up as well, silently placing her hands on Meo's shoulders. I stared at Alice, speechless. He'll be killed sooner or later?

"That is essential. Think about it, saying that he defalcated the company is just a lie. If Kusakabe Masaya testified about this, the matter would be found out. To cover the truth, Tabara-gumi and Mikawa can only kill Kusakabe Masaya."

I thought about Shades' words, and suddenly felt a chill on my back.

-- 'It's nice if they can meet alive!'

They're yakuza. As long as they're in the darkness, they can do anything.

"And the truth that I am searching for will soon be buried in darkness."

Alice jumped down from the chair.

Her gaze didn't look like a detective who accepted a request anymore, but more like a doll who lost her soul, and is worried that the world will forget all about her.

"-- How can we let this happen!"

I chased Alice's silhouette out of the kitchen backdoor, and shouted at the silhouette wearing teddy bear pajamas who was about to walk up the stairs. Her black hair swayed, staring at me with her cold gaze.

"What is it? It's just walking up the stairs, I don't need anyone to tail me."

"No, I don't mean that....."

Why? Why did I halt her? I, myself, didn't even know what I wanted to say.

"I advise you to change your personality of taking action without even thinking. You just go back and do your responsibilities as a high schooler, finishing your homework in the spring break!"

Even Alice said that to me, it makes me feel utterly hopeless.

"Are you trying to ask me if there is anything that you can help out with?"

I could only bite my lips and nod silently as Alice have seen through my thoughts.

"Nothing at all..... If I said that, you'll probably start to pity yourself, sinking into a swamp of self-disgust, then act like an idiot, right?"

"*So* sorry for that!"

"Narumi, let me tell you. In truth, we are all helpless. Being a detective-- the most that I can do is to collect the words of the deceased, rearrange them then search for hidden meanings. Aside from using our brains to ponder about things, do we have any other use?"

"But I don't even know what to think about."

Resigning myself to being laughed at, I exposed the weak side of myself. But the Alice at this moment leaned onto the handrail of the

stairs, looking at me with a kind, understanding expression on her face. Why does this girl like to make fun of me at unexpected times to pain me?

"..... Why do you think Kusakabe Masaya wants Meo to hide the two hundred million yen?"

Alice's gentle voice came over, but I couldn't understand the meaning of the question she just asked at the moment.

"You're asking me why....." I frantically recalled the question that Alice just asked and search for the answer. "Because he realized he fell into a trap, and then..... so that people wouldn't misunderstand that he defalcated it....."

..... Eh?

Seeing me press down my lips, staying silent, Alice nodded.

"That's right, isn't it strange? Because the things that he did cannot prove that he was not the person who defalcated the company, but is instead emphasizing that he did it. If he just wanted to save himself, he could just take the two hundred million yen and escape. If he wanted to clear his charges, he could just hand the two hundred million yen to Kishiwada-kai or call the police. He actually has a lot of choices. Among them, the only inexplicable choice is to tell Meo to hide the two hundred million yen, and hide himself as well."

It is indeed inexplicable.

What can he gain from this? Causing his own daughter to be in danger, and getting caught in the end. There should be better ways that he could use.

"Firstly, 'he did not leave Meo any way of contacting him'. As you have said, it's like he abandoned the two hundred million yen along with Meo. Why did he do that? I don't know. In this case where all the doubts have been clear, the only thing that I cannot understand is the key person, Kusakabe Masaya. This is the one and only mystery."

I don't get it either. Something that even Alice cannot explain, how could I understand?

"However, I suspect that his reason is irrelevant to the nature of the

case."

Alice turned her face to a side, then said in a lonely tone:

"It's just like that time, I'm just trying to satisfy myself. As long as there is a hidden darkness, I cannot afford to not fill it in, what a sorrowful fate."

And then she smiled at me, like a starry sky that I saw a certain day before.

"And then the unneeded truth that I have dug out-- the true reason for Kusakabe Masaya's actions might deeply hurt Meo, just like that time....."

She kept repeating that time, I really don't know when that is. If she's talking about the day when we greeted the breaking dawn on the rooftop that day, I really want to tell her that it's okay.

"..... It doesn't matter." I couldn't suppress my emotions and the words slipped out of my mouth. Alice focused her wandering eyes on my face.

"It doesn't matter. Meo is strong..... much stronger than me. She kept believing in her father. No matter what other people said to her, it didn't affect her belief."

Alice tightly held the rail of the stairs, silently gazing at my face for quite some time. I nearly had trouble breathing. Did I say anything wrong again?

After that, a sigh came out from the peach-colored small mouth.

"Meo might have realized the answer on instinct."

..... answer?

"The answer to what Kusakabe Masaya is trying to do. In theory, a hundred years would be required to reach the extent that we can build a fortress with a bridge leading to it, but the wings of faith can bring us there in just one night. But I am a NEET detective, a messenger of the death. I am not interested in emotions that cannot be expressed in words..... So Meo, you can just keep your truth in your heart."

I turned around in surprise. Skin with the color of coffee ole was

hidden in the seams of the kitchen backdoor that was open for a few centimeters. Her large, round eyes seemed to be blinking repeatedly in surprise.

When I turned my head around after again hearing the footsteps leading upstairs, Alice's silhouette had disappeared from the corner.

I heaved a huge sigh and sat on the second step of the stairs.

Meo slowly opened the kitchen backdoor and walked out. Feeling her utterly terrified gaze, I again felt angry because of the degree of my stupidity.

Just saying things that would make Meo feel uneasy from yesterday, what am I doing? Maybe I'm really a big idiot?

Though the person who's in the most pain is obviously Meo.

Being worried of her father's safety, being wanted by the yakuza herself, and couldn't even go home, she probably feels very uneasy. But at this moment, I still--

Ah, so that's how things stand. I finally understood, the words that Alice said yesterday--

'Nobody cares if you have strong resolution or not.'

'You can just feed realization to chickens, for all I care. What is the thing that we should do?'

Having strong resolve or not is really just my problem, and isn't Meo's business. But my whole brain was stuffed full of myself, and I even said bad things to Meo. What assistant detective! I'm just a thoughtless kid.

"Dad, would he be..... alright? Probably..... right?"

Meo's voice seemed that she almost can't talk anymore.

I silently stood up, caught hold of Meo's shoulders and pushed her into the kitchen.

"It's okay, he'll definitely be okay."

I finally said some words of consolations. Even so, I couldn't even do such a simple thing yesterday.

And then I continued with an empty promise.

"-- We'll definitely save your father."

✻

Min-san told me not to go to the shop for the moment, and so I was chased out of Hanamaru Ramen Shop. Though I was worried about leaving the two there alone, Min-san said:

"Listen closely, if something really happens, I can still protect Meo, but what would I do if I have to protect you too? So you'd better scram and go home."

What a direct order for chasing people out.

Not leaving me even one centimeter of space to protest, I could only leave Hanamaru Ramen Shop. As soon as I reached the main road, I immediately called Tetsu-senpai.

'Alice just called me, so I'm coming to Hanamaru. Blast, I think I must keep guarding that place for now.'

Feeling as if he was saying 'Because you can't', I could only answer clumsily and hang up. Paranoia. Hiro and Major did not answer the phone, probably because they're busy setting up spying devices and looking for information from girls? I know that I'm just a burden. It can't be helped, I could only walk on the streets alone.

At the station during the spring break, there were a lot of people who seemed to be high school students. According to Hiro, a lot of kids from the countryside would come here at this time, causing the whole city to look different.

Anyways, I promised Meo to save her father.

I don't have any information on me, but I will not take action only when other people tells me to. I'll call Yondaime first. He kept an eye open since some time before, so he might have got some new information.

Just at that moment, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

'I heard that Min-san was ambushed, is that true!?'

Hiro's voice sounded rather agitated.

'Narumi, did you go to the ramen shop? How was she? What happened? I couldn't reach the phone of the ramen shop.'

"Er- erm....." It's rare to hear Hiro's flustered voice. "She said that she was pushed a bit, and is just a bit hurt. Tetsu-senpai already hurried there."

The reason that nobody answered the phone in the ramen shop, is probably because they're taking care of the yellow paint. A sigh came from the other side of the phone. What's with Hiro? It feels..... unlike him. Of course, it would be hard to calm down after learning that Min-san was bullied by the yakuza, but.....

'Is that so? Lucky that it's okay..... Ah-- though I feel like going as well, I have some other place to go to, so what should I do? Would Tetsu be okay alone?'

Is it really okay? Though Tetsu-senpai is quite good at fighting, but the opposing party is the yakuza.....

"Erm....."

I'll try asking.

"If there's somewhere that you need to go, I can go for you. Min-san asked me not to go to Hanamaru Ramen Shop, but you can go."

'Ah-- Hmm.....' Hiro started to hesitate, as expected: 'I need to go look for the women, so I must go myself. I appreciate your offer, but this time there's probably.....'

"Nothing that I can help out with?"

Even I, myself, knew that my voice right now felt shameful.

'Mnn..... The only thing left is to check out the situation at Hello Corporation. But there might be people from Tabara-gumi loitering there. All of us have been recognised, so it's somewhat dangerous.'

"They..... probably won't recognise me."

Because I was trembling together with Meo.

'Eh? Ahhh, no..... You're right..... But it's really too dangerous.'

"I'll just go and have a look."

'Narumi, wait a--!'

I switched off my phone after hanging up. I just can't wait here silently.

✻

I've asked Major for the address of Hello Corporation before this, so I found it very quickly. It's at a corner of the district office, about ten minutes distance on bike. It seems like a normal company, and the signboard of the company is hung at the side of the building. The temporary employment company, Hello Corporation is located at a rather new building, of course not the whole building, but only the third floor is rented as their office.

I looked around the commercial building before crossing the zebra crossings. The only people who still remember are probably just the leather suit guy and the purple shirt guy that I met at Hello Palace. I was wearing Hiro's coat and glasses that time, so they probably wouldn't recognise me this time. And there's also the man in the dark brown sunglasses who came to Hanamaru Ramen Shop with the leather suit guy. I was hiding behind the kitchen backdoor that time, they probably didn't notice me as well.

But when the traffic light changed to the green light, my legs couldn't move. A bloodied Min-san surfaced in my mind's eye. Though I really feel ashamed about this, I feel really scared.

Though I said that I would check this out here, I don't even know what to do. Am I an idiot? What did I come here for?

I felt helpless about my own idiocy, then simply sat on the railings beside the road. Cars passed in front of me, while pedestrians walked back and forth behind me.

If only I could see a familiar face, I might just get some information. Thus, I decided to observe the entrance of the building here.

After sitting for awhile, my thoughts drifted back to the construction site at dawn. If only I could do something that time, the situation would not turn out like this. But what could I even do that time? Should I have just suddenly barge in the hut and talk things out with Kusakabe Masaya?

Thinking about this right now is already useless, and he even had a kitchen knife as well.

Kitchen knife, air freshening spray, sewing kit, scissors, lighter, two hundred million yen, Singapore, Thailand, Tabara-gumi, Kishiwada-kai, money laundering.

I really don't get it. What does Kusakabe Masaya want to do? In the incident last time, even a person as dumb as me could figure out half of the truth that Alice found out.

I suddenly noticed someone walking out from the entrance of the building, walking towards here after crossing the zebra crossings. Though wearing only a sporty summer shirt and jeans, the slender eyes really gave me a impression.

"Eh? Ming Hai?"

Yi Ling-san noticed me as well. It felt somewhat awkward.

"What's with you? What are you doing here?"

"Erm..... Uh....." Really, what am i doing? "You can say that I'm observing the enemy."

"Ah....." Yi Ling-san's face fell: "I heard that Kusakabe-san was caught, is it true? The people from Tabara-gumi mentioned that when they came over to have a drink."

"..... It's true. Did they mention where he's at right now?"

"Sorry, I didn't listen to them so closely."

I felt somewhat disappointed. Of course things wouldn't be solved that easily.

"Yi Ling-san, why are you here?"

"Didn't I tell you I'm one of their employees as well? Being suddenly called out here, it didn't bode well for me."

Ahh, I nearly forgot. She's one of the people who exists for money laundering, an employee in name.

If Yi Ling-san knew about this, what would she feel about that? Which means, they used the money that she sent home to make a false financial report, no wonder her wages are so high. Even so--

"Ah!"

Yi Ling-san noticed some other people at the entrance, and immediately turned around. It's a tall man of about forty who's wearing a bluish suit. His skin was whitish, and looked rather decent. Yi Ling-san nodded to him, and the man waved to her.

"..... Who is he?"

"Our Director."

Yi Ling-san answered me quietly, and I came back to my senses, and focused my attention on the man who was somewhat young for a Director. When the man opened the door of the black imported car parked by the road, I nearly cried out loud when I looked into the car from the seams of the door.

"Ming Hai, what's with you? Your mouth's open wide."

"Eh? Ah! It's nothing....."

The imported car left for some time, and the light on the traffic light changed, while other cars were now clustered on the road.

There was another man sitting in the car. Isn't that Shades? Though he wasn't wearing the glasses he was wearing that day, his sharp features were quite hard to forget.

"What an easy job, he can already go home now.I heard the girls from General Administration say that he went home about noon yesterday too. Probably didn't even stay at the company for one hour?"

"Yesterday too.....?"

"What is it? Do you know our Director?"

"Eh? Ah, no, I don't know him. Oh yeah, do you know the the other man in the car?"

"Mnn--? I'm not really sure, probably a yakuza boss? It seems like he was talking to Director about something just now. Ah, that's right. Ming Hai, can you listen to my complaints? They really went too far!"

Yi Ling-san dragged me into a Mos Burger nearby. As usual, the table was piled full of burgers, hot dogs, salad and fries that were like small hills. Just seeing that would make people lose my appetite, so I just picked up an onion ring to eat.

"We might not be able to stay in Japan anymore."

After clearing away half of her food, Yi Ling-san finally said:

"I was told about this matter just now, but not the reason. Saying something like don't send the money back home anymore, and not continuing the contract anymore, it really troubles me, telling me all that all of a sudden."

"This is really..... bad."

"Isn't that right? It seems that most of the people in our building were called here to be told about this. They gained so much from us foreign workers too. It seems that the company is trying to change its style and become a more legal temporary employment company, so they probably want to get rid of burdens like us? Ah-- if Kusakabe-san is still here, he'd probably think of something to help us."

I sank into deep thought. Is this connected to the case? If Kusakabe Masaya is still here-- which means, it's because Kusakabe Masaya is not here anymore? But why is that? Aren't the women in Hello Palace just gears for the money laundering?

"And they don't even let us work at other shops. Isn't this my own freedom? But to tell you the truth, the company handles the matters about our visas, so we might just have to go home. Ah-- Really-- angry!"

Yi Ling-san then proceeded to stuff Mexican sauce hot dogs into her mouth.

"It seems that the yakuza was here just now to talk about this matter, that was what the General Administration people told me."

I subconsciously stood up, but my knee collided with the side of the

table. Yi Ling-san hurriedly held the iced coffee that nearly toppled over.

"What is it, what happened?"

"No, nothing." It's indeed related to the case. "Erm..... What were they talking about?"

"I'm not too sure as I heard this from other people, but they mentioned something about checking the core or something. I wonder what that means. Maybe they thought that we ganged up with Kusakabe-san? Or maybe they thought we would call the police? But they don't need to chase me out of Japan like this!"

Checking the core?

"Ah....."

While staring at the surface of the orange juice, I slowly sat down.

I feel that-- I understand.

Alice said this before, money laundering through Hello Palace is inefficient, plus, the company defalcated the yakuza's money. Since the money was obtained from unlawful sources, the company must launder the money to pay their debts. What should they do then? Of course, they used Hello Palace for this. The method that was already inefficient was no longer used for Kishiwada-kai, but for the company's own gains; and Kusakabe Masaya who was in charge of coordinating the plan wasn't here-- the money laundering would of course come to a standstill, unable to be used. At least it would look like this from Kishiwada-kai's point of view.

So what would happen next?

To these people, the tenants of Hello Palace are like cotton filters that are full of grime after filtration (though this isn't really a good way of saying this). If the government sniffed out the matter and went through investigation, it would be troublesome. And things might happen as Yi Ling-san said, some people might be arrested because of Kusakabe Masaya's incident.

So, things that don't have any value would be tossed away.

The unlucky thing is (it's lucky for those people), the tenants of Hello Palace are all foreigners.

If only they just fire all of them and send them back to their original countries, investigation would be unable to continue.

Almost all of this is just my assumptions, but if it's really true, things are really bad. Drinking a mouthful of orange juice, it tasted unnaturally bitter.

"……Hai. Oi, Ming Hai!"

I was pulled back to reality from my thoughts by Yi Ling-san's voice.

"Eh? Ah, what is it?"

"Ming Hai, how old are you now?"

"…… I'm sixteen this year." Why did she suddenly ask my age?

"Two more years. I can't wait two more years, and you need your parents' permission. I can't get a visa like this, and we have to live together. I thought that Ming Hai would be okay too……"

Eh, wait? What is she saying?

"Ahh- I should've gotten a boyfriend from the start."

✻

I parted ways with Yi Ling-san after exiting Mos Burger. Really, which were true? Probably all of them were jokes, right? I shook my head to fling out Yi Ling-san's calculating smile out of my mind, and walked while thinking about the changes surrounding Hello Corporation.

We must now concentrate on understanding the circumstances surrounding the matter.

But when I passed through the crossroads of the district office and reached the front of Tobu Restaurant, my thoughts started to come to a standstill, and my footsteps slowed.

I walked into a convenience store, pushed away an office worker who was taking lunch break and bought a can of coffee, then

walked to the public phone in front of the shop to sit down and rest.

Picking up my phone and flipping open the cover, but then closed it again immediately.

Thinking about the matter of the young Director called Mikawa talking things out with the yakuza, Tabara-gumi, and the problem of the tenants of Hello Palace being fired and kicked back to their own country.

This might not be related with this case, and might not be directly related to Kusakabe Masaya as well.

Anyways, I would just need to send the information to Alice. I should just disregard if it is meaningful information, as she is much cleverer than me.

But--

Don't do meaningless flaunting. After saying that to myself for about fifteen times and above, my fingers still could not move. I don't really feel like calling Alice no matter what, but I'd probably get another lecture from her if I tell her any later, something like 'Your slowness is really amazing, I'd say even the speed of Venus rotating would be quicker than you' or something like that. Even so.....

I finally understood that Alice knew that I would take action myself from the start, so I don't really dare to call her. Aside from this, the days when she treat me as an idiot would be better.

The empty cans beside my feet increased in twos and threes. The shopkeepers stared oddly at me, who just bought only one can of coffee each time.

As I was about to open my forth can, my phone suddenly blared the ringtone of 'Colorado Bulldog', startling me into throwing away the can accidentally.

'Narumi, where are you right now?'

Alice's voice seemed very harried.

"At a public restaurant, beside Tobu Restaurant. What is it?"

'Meo left!'

I immediately stood up, and bumped my head on the public phone.

"……!"

'What was that noise?'

"Nothing…… When did that happen?"

'About thirty minutes before this, I only noticed when I checked the surveillance camera just now. I only monitored the actions of the underlings of Tabara-gumi, what a mistake that was.'

The taste of the coffee in my mouth became bitter like charred wood.

'Her bag disappeared too. Can you think of any place Meo might have gone to?'

"…… What about her house?"

'I asked Hiro to go.'

Places Meo might go to. Meo…… left. Why? Unquestionably, it's to meet her father. Or she would trouble Min-san if she continues to stay there.

"Did she say anything to Min-san?"

'She took the chance to run away when Master was in the ramen shop, do you even have to ask? Master would stop her if she knew it from the start.'

Left without saying a thing. i felt a black, cold substance crawling up from the bottom of my foot, engulfing my throat at that instant. I could not continue to stand, tightly holding the public phone. Why? Why are they the same, leaving without saying anything? Thinking that they're sympathetic towards us but disappeared without a word, don't they know how much harm they did to us? Are they idiots!? What the heck! My anger that can't be vented caused my hands holding the phone to tremble.

'……mi, Narumi! What's with you!? Can you hear me!?'

Hearing Alice shout beside my ears, I came back to my senses:

"…… I'm okay. I'll go search for her."

But how can I find her?

I stare at the dark skies, then shifted my attention to the busy streets. Looking for a young girl in the crowd of this city, is as hard as separating teardrops and raindrops that flow into the sea; and Meo doesn't have a phone too.

I suddenly thought of something at this moment, then turned around to look at the public phone behind me.

"Alice, did you check Kusakabe Masaya's phone log?"

Perhaps I was too focused, but my voice was so loud that the couple entering the convenience store had a shock and stared at me.

'I almost checked all of it-- Ah, I see!'

The rapid fire sound of someone pounding a keyboard came from the other side of the phone. Alice noticed what I was thinking about in just an instant. Meo chose to leave Hanamaru Ramen Shop because she didn't want to trouble Min-san. To achieve her aim, what would she do? She can't let people see her leave, and can't be noticed by the yakuza monitoring the shop, so she must leave Hanamaru Ramen Shop stealthily. After she succeeded, she must let the people in Tabara-gumi know that she isn't in the ramen shop anymore. The only way that Meo can contact these people is--

'Stop talking, Narumi! She's at Lowson Supermarket opposite to Quattro Restaurant, understand?'

I started to run before Alice even finished talking. Passing through the crossroad for pedestrians, I entered the narrow alley beside Parco Supermarket.

"How long was the last call?"

'About ten minutes before. Wait, Narumi, don't go there. What if you meet the people from Tabara-gumi?'

"What's the use of saying things like this, is there even anyone else to help!?"

'It's quite near to the office of Hirasaka-gumi--'

I hung up and threw my phone into my pocket. Ten minutes before. Maybe she left the place long before this? Can I still find her?

Seeing the dark-skinned girl with a Boston bag in her hands standing below the signboard of Lawson Supermarket, I nearly shouted out Meo's name from the other side of the road in excitement. After realizing that she seemed to be waiting for someone at the public phone, I immediately swallowed the words that I was about to shout out back into my stomach.

I passed through the road and went nearer to Meo, only to see her looking extremely surprised, widening her eyes while tightly hugging her bag in front of her chest.

"Mr. Assistant, why are you here?"

I supported both of my hands on my knees with my back bent, trying to adjust my own breathing. As I ran suddenly, my head felt bouts of aches due to lack of oxygen.

"..... Meo, let's go back."

Meo shook her head violently with her braids swaying along.

"No, please leave, Mr. Assistant."

"You contacted the yakuza, right?"

Seeing Meo biting her lips without answering, my agitated heartbeat slowed helplessly. Meo plans to hand herself and the two hundred million yen to Tabara-gumi. Is her brain okay? Doesn't she know what would happen if she did that?

"You'll know if you just think about it, how could they let you and your father who knows all about this go? What are you thinking!? Idiot!"

"Bu- But.....!"

"Anyways--"

As I was about to stretch out my hands to pull the strap of the bag, the sound of emergency braking came behind me, then Meo's expression went through a huge change: "Mr. Assistant, please let go!"

Turning my head around, I saw that the back door of a black van was open, and two men were walking over here from the van. One of them is the leather suit guy!

"Run!"

"Eh? Wa- Wait a minute!"

I snatched the Boston bag from Meo's shoulders and carried it on my shoulders, running away while holding Meo's hands tightly. Harried footsteps and the sound of an engine starting came from behind us. "Both of you, don't move!" ignoring the angry roars behind us, I dragged Meo into a slope in a narrow alley, jumped over a short wall, speedily going across the empty space in front of the entrance of a building.

"Mr. Assistant..... Do- Don't do this!"

Shut up and just run! Forcing out the sounds of the footsteps of the two men chasing behind us, my hands holding Meo's tightened. The strap of the Boston bag slided down slightly, and my lungs burned in pain. Anyways, we have to find a way to mix with the crowd, anyw--

Reaching a narrow road of a back alley after rushing down the slope, a loud horn sounded from the side, giving me a huge fright and stopped without being able to move. The black van from just now blocked our vision. We're surrounded! It was too late when I noticed it, and not waiting for me to turn my head around, the two from before reached our sides.

"You troublesome fellows.....!"

The leather coat guy said while panting. A chill rose from the bottom of my heart, and it felt as if the parts below my knees disappeared. So it still can't be helped, it can't be helped.....

"Wait, this person isn't involved in this, so....."

Meo's pleading was blocked by the man's hand. The door of the van opened: "Both of you, get on the car!"The rough voice of another man came from the van. I imagined ramming the stomach of the man on my right, then waving the Boston bag to hit the man on the left, finally running away hurriedly with Meo, but in truth, my hands couldn't even move, as if they were frozen. The man in the van extended his hands to try to snatch the bag from my shoulders, while I reflexively tightened my hold.

"Blasted kid, let go.....!"

A hot fist punched my abdomen. Not even feeling the pain at first, a sense of wanting to puke started to come from my throat.

"..... (cough).....(hack)!"

` The yakuza grabbed myself, who was about to collapse, holding my shoulders and punching my belly again. It felt to me as if the sounds of my bones fracturing spread throughout my brain, and my mouth was filled with a sour taste. My vision turned blurry. What was Meo shouting about, I wonder? While being kicked by the two men beside me on the belly, I thought about Alice, not knowing why myself. Sorry, it's because I didn't listen to you, so I'm getting such treatment right now. I'm just too cowardly. A hand stretched out from the car behind me, trying to drag me inside.

It was at this moment, there was a loud bang. The whole van moved to a side, and the man who was about to catch hold of me fell to a side. I was also thrown on the road.

Showing a pained expression because of the pain on my whole body, a blue car was suddenly reflected in my eyes. From goodness knows when, a truck rammed into the back of the van, causing the bumper to become deformed, while the engine gave out white smoke.

"Wha.....!?"

While the yakuza were still confused, the door of the truck opened quickly, then three men in black T-shirts jumped down from the seat beside the driver's seat and the rear cargo racks, while a man wearing a crimson coat looked out from the driver's seat.

"Gardening Club kid, get to the back!" Yondaime pointed to the cargo rack with his thumb.

"-- Damn..... What are you doing.....!?"

Other silhouettes rushed out from the van. Two-- no, three. Angry shouts and fists met. Though they were people from Hirasaka-gumi, who were still quite good at fighting, they were still rather overwhelmed when facing real yakuza, two underlings were collapsed on the asphalt road in just an instant.

"Don't get so cocky, kid!"

The yakuza mercilessly kicked the young black shirted men. With

my mouth full of blood of despair, I forcibly stood up and caught hold of Meo's hand. Since the yakuza shifted their attention, do we still have a chance to escape?

"Hurry up and get up!" I was grabbed from the back, and it felt as if someone forced an ice cube down my gut. "Oi, stop playing! We're leaving!"

A loud shout echoed, abut the members of Hirasaka-gumi were still fighting with the yakuza.

"-- Get down!"

A piercing voice echoed through the whole streets. It was Yondaime.

His hands extended from the truck threw a small, unknown object, and rolled to the side of my leg after drawing an arc in the sky. I saw the men in black T-shirts cover their ears and squat down. Thinking back on that moment, I still feel mystified now that I was able to do the same actions they did that time. Needless to say, I found out about the real identity of the small, cylindrical object very soon.

Tightly hugging Meo's head beside me and squatting down-- I didn't have enough time to cover my ears. The small object emitted a deafening noise and a piercing light. My mind went blank.....

It was a flash grenade specially made by Major.

I didn't know how long I lost consciousness for.

Regaining consciousness because of the sounds of someone being beaten up, a weeping Meo was at my side, while the black shirted men were around us. After swaing around for some time with the others, I realized that I was at the cargo rack at the rear of the truck.

"Aniki, sorry for being late."

The underlings apologized to me with their face beaten black and blue. I wanted to answer him, but couldn't say a thing due to my dry mouth and trembling lips. My heartbeats brought about bouts of pain at my wounds.

✻

There was a short bookshelf, a simple bed and a small table placed among some cardboard boxes in the dark study of the office of the gang, while only the monitor of the computer that hadn't been switched off yet is emitting a faint light.

The greenish white rays of light that shone on Meo, who was tightly hugging the bag to her chest, and made her face seem sickly. I found a bookshelf and sat down, not knowing what to say, so I just silently stared at the programs running on the computer screen. I now felt that Yondaime, who arranged us to have a talk alone, was rather over-sensitive. The pain on my belly due to the kicks from the yakuza just felt like an old wound that hurts occasionally to me right now.

I have absolutely no need to ask her why she left, as it wouldn't help with anything. Since it's Meo's own body, her own life.

But--

"Mr. Assistant, is your wound still okay?"

"Don't worry so much about that, it's just my own rashness. My own fault."

Why do I sound so impatient every time I answer her?

"Are you still angry?"

Meo looked up slightly while saying. I sighed:

"Why did you leave?"

And in the end, she still gave the answer that was already clear to us.

"..... Because..... if I didn't go, my dad would be killed."

Sniffs were mixed in between her words.

"He might be killed even though you went, and you might get tortured too. You should've been more careful."

I finished saying that while suppressing my emotions with some

effort, my tone as flat as flattened clay.

"But it should be okay after we returned....."

"They're yakuza."

I interrupted Meo, while she buried her face in the bag.

"..... I want to see dad. I don't like this, dad being at a place where I'm not there..... These things, these things....."

Her words were soon replaced by sounds of crying, but I answered mercilessly:

"But you don't need to leave even so. Do you know how worried Min-san was!?"

"But....." Meo raised her eyes swollen with tears: "If I said that I wanted to leave, you guys would definitely stop me."

"Duh, of course!"

I got angry unknowingly. Meo's shoulders curled up in fright. Actually, I'm the one who's the most surprised, I didn't think that I would get so angry. Shifting my attention to the dusty floor, I adjusted my own breathing.

Though I was obviously one of the people who forced Meo into a corner.

Being angry wouldn't help out with things, I probably have other things that I should tell her. How should I start? Forget it, it doesn't matter even if she doesn't understand. Anyways, I'll feel like shouting at someone if I don't express my feelings accumulated inside of me in words.

Expressing in words.

Where should I start?

After thinking for quite some time, I finally opened my mouth. But it felt as if I wasn't saying that to Meo, but to myself.

"Have I told you about Ayaka?"

Meo gazed at my face while answering: "Just the name."

I couldn't stand Meo's innocent gaze, so I stared at the computer screen while saying.

"We're classmates..... and she's my friend."

Is the word 'friend' right? I stopped for a moment, thinking about it.

"I was a transfer student, and didn't have much friends. Ayaka invited me to join the Gardening Club, and the one who brought me to Hanamaru Ramen Shop was also her. That's why, it's because of Ayaka that I can meet Meo."

That should be-- a continuous miracle.

"..... Then where is she now?"

"Lying on a hospital bed."

Silence.

Sounds came from the CPU.

"She jumped down from the rooftop of our school. Though she didn't die, she wouldn't be able to wake up anymore."

Until this moment, I started to gaze at Meo's face. Her tightly closed lips, her attentive eyes.

"Alice once told me the reason for Ayaka jumping down the building, but I don't know if it's true, and these matters are already meaningless anyways. Ayaka just jumped without saying anything, without saying even a word to me. Do you know how I became after that?"

Meo silently shook her head.

"I became completely helpless, nobody could help me. I couldn't hate anyone, couldn't be angry at anyone, it's just that there's a large hole in my heart, only the coldness in my heart increased. It was very painful."

Meo nodded. White rays were reflected on her face, her face reflecting the weak rays of light form the computer screen.

"That might be easier for the people to go without telling the others. Making a conclusion themselves, just agreeing with your own conclusion. But after we make friends, shouldn't we leave some

space in our hearts for our friends? After tidying all the matters, there's a lot of space left. So don't go without saying a word. If there's nobody in the space left over, what should we do then? If the results are like this, it's better if we didn't even meet."

Halfway through my words, I didn't even know who I was speaking to anymore. The darkness in the study, the Ayaka in my memory, or even my own self, listening to my own words, all of them didn't respond.

The one who responded was instead Meo.

"..... Sorry."

There's nothing simpler than this word. After hearing this, the knots in my heart loosened. If we could simply express these simple words, Ayaka and I might be living a better life right now.

"But you saying that it's better not to meet, that's probably a lie."

I smiled wryly in response. It's probably an okay smile, right? The surroundings were too dark, I couldn't differentiate whether Meo was crying or laughing.

"But since you handed the case to the detective, you should believe in her until the last second. We might be just delaying things right now, but we wouldn't hand Meo to the yakuza no matter what, and we would definitely save your father."

"Yeah....." And I'm sure that she was crying this time.

"Of course, choosing to leave is your own decision, we have no right to force you to stay. But if you really want to leave, remember to tell me first."

Then--

"And then you'll stop me, right?" There were tears in Meo's eyes.

The person that felt relieved might not be Meo, but myself.

I heaved a huge sigh and stood up.

However, Meo halted me, who was about to walk out of the study.

"What is it?"

"..... How did you know where I was so quickly?"

I originally wanted to say something to comfort her, but I really can't think of anything.

"Meo's thoughts are really easy to guess."

Meo showed me a shy smile, stood up and walked to my side, then caught hold of my left hand and raised it. My heart pounded for a moment, my spine touching the door of the room.

"What..... is it?"

Meo wrote out a few words on my palm, a complicated shape made of squares and circles. I realized that it was probably Thai.

"Charunee."

"What?"

"It's my real name, only my dad knows about that."

Meo closed my left hand, then tightly held my hand with both of her hands. Her hands were much warmer than mine.

"So that Meo would not be caught by demons, please remember my name, okay?"

Being stared at by the eyes that were wet because of tears just now, I could only feel a hot flow on my face. I shifted my gaze, and nodded.

Hitting something when I opened the study door, I heard someone saying 'Ouch!'.

"..... What are you guys doing?"

About four black shirted lackeys were squeezed outside the door, eavesdropping. As I was about to walk to the office, all of them showed me an embarrassed smile and went back a few steps.

"Well, it's because aniki is alone with another girl."

"That's right. If anything happens, we have to report to ane-san."

Huh?

"We heard that you've already reached the state when you're sleeping together on the same bed."

"Second Brother Hiro said that aniki has potential, so it's dangerous like this."

What in the world are these people talking about!?

"Erm..... My relationship with Alice isn't what you imagined."

"What happened?"

Unable to exit the study, Meo asked behind me, while I turned my head around and waved my hand, telling her that it's okay.

"What are you guys doing?"

The steel door opened, and Yondaime walked in with Pole and Rocky. I can finally relax. "I still have something to discuss with Yondaime, so you just wait inside for awhile." I pushed Meo back into the study and closed the door after saying that.

"Gardening Club kid, finished talking to her?"

"Finished."

Yondaime sat on the sofa in the opposite. About ten members of Hirasaka-gumi surrounded us, and it made me feel as if I was at a deep, dark well.

"I've contacted Hiro, he'll come get you guys immediately."

"About this,..... Mnn..... I have a request."

After I said that, Yondaime's gaze sharpened.

"It's impossible for me to hide the girl for you."

Whoa..... I was rejected immediately. Am I really such an easy person to read? I feel that I'm living like an open book, it feels really depressing. But this time I continued to plead:

"Can't you do it?"

"So what's our relationship with that woman? It's because Alice asked me to save you just now that I let the girl tag along just now. Troublesome people should just scram!"

His way of talking is really merciless.

"But you said that you owe me one....."

"Do you think I have to do anything for you because I owe you? Are you an idiot? Didn't I tell you before, the only people that I will help are my people and the their friends. I might just help you if you were in trouble, but I don't care about that woman. I don't have the obligation to fight things out with Tabara-gumi just to save her."

I really have nothing to say. As Yondaime is a yakuza, he has a clear boundary between moral principles and his own people.

I started to think with my fist supporting my forehead. I just need to talk things out, so I have to think of a reasonable reason.

Seeing us in a silence, the black shirts around us started to get anxious. But since they know that the end result of talking too much is to get beaten up by Yondaime, nobody dared to say anything. These people are related in name in their world, so as the leader, Yondaime's words are extremely powerful.

..... Ah, that's right.

Examining all the reasons that I could think of. Is this reason okay? I might get beaten up, but since they're not really yakuza, I could just pretend that we're playing family.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, thinking carefully of the words to say.

"Erm..... Is it okay if it's related to me?"

"Speak."

"Please do that..... what is it again.....? Undergo the sake ceremony with me."

Yondaime's brows twitched, while the lackeys around me started to make a commotion.

"Aniki finally....."

"It's great."

"Sou-san, we beg you too--"

"Stop joking!" Yondaime roared, and the commotion stopped immediately. "I said this before, I will not let a high schooler join us!"

"I don't want to join your gang." I immediately answered: "It's not that I want to join the gang, but to become sworn brothers. Please do it!"

A shocked expression appeared on Yondaime's face all of a sudden, then he started grinding his teeth.

"Then we'll not owe each other anything..... Is that okay?"

I continued in pursuit. But I could obviously see that as Yondaime's degree of anger rises, I felt rather scared that I said too much.

"So that's it, becoming sworn brothers."

"Then we can't call you aniki, but Second Brother(?)."

"It's easy to confuse it with Second Brother Hiro, aniki, so can we continue to call you aniki?"

The friendship betweens sworn brothers. Just like this, Yondaime and I would become 'relatives'. Saving my friend-- the reason for saving Meo is thus born.

As the members of Hirasaka-gumi were dancing in joy because of this, Yondaime stood up, and all of them became silent immediately. The sharp gaze of a wolf stared at me furiously, causing me to be unable to breathe.

Even so, Yondaime said in an embarrassed tone:

"Going through the sake ceremony with you would make us even, you'll owe me one when I protect the girl for you, understand?"

Unable to hide my excitement, I nodded. Thinking back about it calmly, isn't it more terrifying to owe Yondaime one? But I just didn't think of so much at that time. The black shirts cheered.

"It's great!"

"Let's go celebrate!"

"Shut up. It'll be on tomorrow morning, hurry up and prepare!" Yondaime roared.

"Understood!"

"I'll go hone my manly aura right away!"

After that, Yondaime asked the lackeys to do some stuff, then they rushed out of the office. As for me, I leaned against the sofa, staring at my palms. Things can't be turned back anymore, it felt just like that.

"Gardening Club kid, do you have Kusakabe's phone number?"

When all the people left the office, Yondaime sat on the sofa and asked.

"Eh.....? Ah, I do."

I opened my contacts in my phone and handed it to Yondaime, while Yondaime immediately dialled the number using the phone in the office.

..... Eh? That's not right, wait, what is he trying to do!?

"-- I'm Hinamura from Hirasaka-gumi. Tell someone who's in charge to answer the phone."

I don't know if the phone got through, but Yondaime said in a deep voice:

"Shut up, who are you? Are you from Tabara-gumi? That's right, I'm Hinamura Soichiro. You heard about the matter about the van, right? That's even better, Kusakabe is probably still alive, right? What? Of course it's for our ties of friendship. None of your business! The woman and the cash are on me. Listen closely, look for Hirasaka-gumi directly if you have any problems. Try to do anything to the ramen shop again, and I'll exterminate you!"

Yondaime hung up the phone and placed it back onto the table.

He glared at me with ferocious eyes, then said:

"Are you sure that you can win?"

I stared at the silent phone on the table, then shook my head.

"You're the one who raised the stakes, so think of something yourself."

It's the same words that Min-san said to Meo.

I really don't know what to do. It was only at times of need when I thought of solutions, not to mention matters of tomorrow. But I could only nod silently at this moment. The person who caused us to be unable to turn back is no longer Meo, but my own self.

Chapter 5

It was only until the day that Yondaime and I became sworn brothers that I found out that not only the third floor, but the second floor was also rented by the gang. The partitions in the second floor was broken down to become a hall of about twenty tatamis, the floor was covered with wooden boards, and there was an altar in the room. It looks just like a kendo dojo.

Seven in the morning on Thursday, there were a lot of people gathered at the somewhat cold venue. Following Yondaime into the hall, I felt extremely surprised. So there were twenty..... no, probably even more than twenty in the gang? Were they all gathered here?

Almost all of them were wearing their uniform, the black T-shirts, but only Rocky and Pole were wearing an odd costume. A large shoulder pad cut out from cardboard was hung on their upper torso, like a cut out person used for advertisements, and also baggy trousers for students.

"Oi, what are you wearing that for? Is that a joke!?"

Yondaime glared furiously at the two.

"This is the haori for a kimono."

"As today is a day worthy of celebration, it's a pity that we don't have traditional warrior clothings to wear, so we made it yesterday."

Are these guys idiots.....? As expected, Yondaime tore up the cardboard cut out of traditional warrior clothing .

"Ahhh, it's so cruel, I stayed up all night to do that too....."

"Idiot! Our guests are coming, do you want to embarrass us!?"

Yondaime roared, then Pole and Rocky cringed. Guests?

At this moment, the steel door was opened, and outside wind blew into the venue for the ceremony that completely lacked a sense of nervousness.

"Wow, it's so big in here!" The first person to enter, Meo, shouted joyfully.

"It's been quite a while since I've been in here." The next was Tetsu-senpai, who was unexpectedly donning a blazer. Is it going to snow later?

"I think the last time that I was here was probably when Hirasaka-gumi was founded?" I'm not sure if Major misunderstood something, but he was wearing military clothing of the Japanese naval army with an armband. What's with him? Is he here to act out a play?

"It's such a pity, you should really use this floor better." Hiro wore a pure white suit of a hustler.

The most surprising person who came in was Alice, carried on Hiro's back, and she was wearing a kimono too.

It was a sumptuous, luxurious furisode that was dyed with black edo yuzen dye, matched with pictures of pine, bamboo, plum and chrysanthemum. Even so, she was still holding her small, signature teddy on her hands. This scene really makes me speechless.

As Alice stepped into the hall, the lackeys immediately stood up and bowed to her at the same time:

"Ane-san, Second Brother Hiro, thanks for your hard work!"

"Thanks for your hard work!"

"Oi! Who told you to call all of them here!"

Yondaime's brows raised because of anger.

"Don't be like that, Alice can't come here alone anyways. I'd get angry if you don't tell me about such a fun thing." Tetsu-senpai pushed Yondaime in the chest after saying that. It's only at these times that I feel empathy with Yondaime, as we sighed at the same time.

Alice walked to my side and pulled on my sleeves:

"Aren't you working a bit too much? Things turning out like this, I really feel lazy to even scold you that you do things without thinking..... What is it? Why are you staring at me?"

"Eh.....? Ah, it's nothing." I shifted my gaze in embarrassment, it's

not that I'm really staring at her because I'm attracted to it. "So you have these clothes too?"

I once saw her in mourning attire, but she was only in her pajamas the other times, so I was quite surprised. To be exact, it felt like the only person who's wearing clothing suitable for the ceremony is Alice. Wearing a kimono, Alice had long, black hair that could almost touch the floor. From any angle you look at her, she just looks like a Japanese doll that can move.

"I was only in time to bring my formal clothings when I left my home."

"Oi, you guys should first sit down." Yondaime said to us, who were gathered at the entrance.

Of course, I have never seen a sake ceremony of yakuza, so it's impossible for me to know how formal the preparations are. But to outsiders like us, it feels quite impressive. There were a row of cushions placed at the left and right side of the hall, while two seats of honor were placed for Yondaime and I, while there were also ceremonial objects placed in front, sake bottles, salt, and a living sea bream. There were also two wine dishes. Twelve huge candles were lighted in the ceremonial hall of the room, and there were also five scrolls hung behind them. These were written on them from right to left:

'Takeuchi Riki'

'The Current Emperor'

'Amaterasu'

'Emperor of the Five Grains'

'Edajima Heihachi'

What is this.....?

"You could say that Yondaime is a business-type yakuza....." Alice told me: "The origins of the Emperor of the Five Grains is debateable, but he's the third among the three sovereigns and five emperors. It is said that he gave mankind agriculture and medicine, and he invented strings for instruments and markets, so he's undeniably a businessman, so the businessmen pray to him as their god. As for the other four, you probably don't need me to explain,

right?"

Hey, I *do* need an explanation. I have absolutely no idea of what the leftmost and rightmost ones are.....

"Takeuchi Riki is....."

"A Man." A man in black T-shirt answered.

"A man among men."

"And Edajima Heihachi is.....?"

"A Man."

"A man among men among men!"

I know that too..... But I don't really feel like knowing more about this.....

"Oi, didn't I tell you not to continue to misunderstand me?" Yondaime interrupted: "My family are just regular businessmen, not yakuza. If I'm really a yakuza, how can I inherit my father's business?"

Only at these times, Alice and the black shirted men would pretend not to hear anything at the same time. Do they really want Hina to be the forth generation of a yakuza?

Somewhat displeased, Yondaime said with a voice that penetrated the whole hall:

"Let's begin!"

The sake ceremony was much simpler than I thought. As we're going to become sworn brothers of equal status, we would only need to fill the two dishes with sake and drink it. Tetsu-senpai, as the person who filled the wine, filled up the dish, then Yondaime turned to me and said:

"Do you know how the name 'Hirasaka-gumi' came to be?"

I shook my head. I never noticed before this, but it's different from Yondaime's surname

"There's this fellow called Hirasaka before this, he gathered the jobless people in this town to form a team. There wasn't a title

called NEET before this, and he's not here anymore."

Yondaime's wolf-like gaze become slightly gentler.

"He's an idiot who loves movies. He named the gang, designed an emblem and set up tons of meaningless rules, settle arguements with fights, having a sake ceremony when joining the gang and the likes."

"Is that so."

"Often watching yakuza movies, the only Western movie Hirasaka liked was 'Ben-Hun'. Have you watched it before?"

"Yeah....."

At that moment, I immediately realized what Yondaime wanted to say after that. Is it that? Are we really going to do that? Uwaa, that's..... really embarrassing.

"To become sworn brothers, we must do that."

"Wouldn't this completely destroy our Japanese culture?"

"Shut up!"

Yondaime picked up the wine dish in front of me. Having no choice, I could only pick up the dish in front of Yondaime.

The scene when the main character in the movie 'Ben-Hun' drank with his companions-- taking the wine dish of the other, cross each other's arms and drinking it directly. When the wine dish reaches the mouth of the two at the same time, the double loop formed from the arms, shoulders until the head would form a chain.

The first time I drank wine was the wine in the sake ceremony with a yakuza, probably I'm the only one who did that in his high school life in Japan, huh? The sake was spicy and bitter, and it felt like my tongue was going to break off.

After that, we stacked the dishes together after finishing them.

"Alice, since you're the go-between, say something."

Yondaime said to Alice, kneeling at the highest place of honor at my side, beside Tetsu-senpai.

"Anything? I didn't prepare a script for saying anything at any sake ceremonies."

"Just say anything."

"Regardless of health, illness, or joy, thou shalt--" "Stop joking!" "If anyone requests it, I can also perform Takasago (Note: It's a song from a Japanese play)." "Stop playing around....."

When Yondaime was about to stand up in impatience, Alice smiled wryly and waved her hand:

"Sorry, sorry. I'll be serious this time."

While hugging her bear, Alice walked towards us in small steps, and sat down when the three of us formed a triangle, pushing away her sleeve with an elegant posture.

Firstly, she told this to Yondaime:

"I hope that you can take care of Narumi. Though he looks like he's unreliable on the outside, he's even more unreliable inside. I'm guessing that he probably thinks that Hirasaka-gumi is just a game where kids pretend to be yakuza. Or he wouldn't dare to make such a terrifying request, isn't that right?"

Then, she shifted her gaze from Yondaime to me. I was quite shocked. I was seen through again.....

"I hope that your brotherhood would just end up only as a form. I don't think you really understand, but Hinamura Souchiro would not just become sworn brothers with anyone just to impress other people or because he's drunk..... Anyways, he's actually silently acknowledging your strengths."

"Don't speak of these irrelavant things!"

Yondaime shouted. I was startled and turned to look and him, only to shift my gaze again due to being glared at.

Yondaime-- acknowledges me?

How can this be? Because.....

"You don't use your brain most of the times, but for some reason, when things become out of our control at the last second, your assumptions would instead make things seem quite logical."

A warm smile appeared on Alice's face.

"Instead of being a detective, it's better for you to get another occupation."

Another occupation?

After Alice's speech ended, she stood up and turned to the others.

"And so, hurry up and give applause for celebration. Staying in such a big room gives me a headache, so please raise your hands....."

Before Yondaime even had time to complain, everyone stood up, and an invigorating applause rang in the hall.

✻

"Mnn, this place is more or less like my room, I can relax more here."

After bringing Alice to the study, she immediately stretched out her feet on the bed, and looked around her as if she was in her own room. Hey hey, don't forget that you're wearing a kimono, this posture is really dangerous.....

"Why didn't you go home yet?"

Yondaime walked into the crowded room. Meo and I sat at a side of the bed, Major sat on the table with the computer and telephone on it, while Hiro sat on the bookshelf near the entrance. Only Tetsu-senpai left immediately after the ceremony ended. He said that he was still worried of Min-san, so he would continue to guard Hanamaru Ramen Shop.

"Don't we need to have a tactical meeting right now? And now Yondaime's involved in this too." Alice said.

Yondaime glared at Meo sitting beside me, while the best thing about Meo is that she could still face him with a smile in this situation. In the end, Yondaime sat on another bookshelf.

"Uwaa! The US aircrafts wallpapers I saved in the computer are all gone! Vice Admiral Fujishima, look what you've done!" Major roared. The computer was actually picked up by Major and randomly set up.

"If you have time to collect wallpapers, can't you please install Norton Antivirus first……?"

"Even if I installed it, nobody in Hirasaka-gumi could update it."

He has a point, nobody here would think of updating the antivirus software regularly. Eh? Why is Major playing with the computer since just now? After a glace, it seems like he was printing information from his USB disk. And then, a sound came from the printer, and a paper was printed out.

Major kicked the cardboard box beside his foot to the center and used it as a table, then placed the printed paper on top of it.

"What map is this?"

Yondaime pushed away Hiro and stared at the paper.

"…… Ahhh, it's the strongholds of Tabara-gumi."

Seeing the two places circled with red pen, Yondaime seemed to realize it immediately.

"As expected of Yondaime. This one is the office, while the other one is a room in a building used as a warehouse. Of course, we aren't sure where Kusakabe is right now. Since it can't be confirmed from the recordings, and the people in charge of monitoring the places didn't report any suspicious people brought there."

Alice squeezed between Meo and I like a caterpillar, and pointed at the red circles in turn while saying. Both of the places were quite a distance form the station.

"The case this time is quite special, because we have already grasped the true identity of the kidnappers. I would like to take the initiative to call them and request them to let Kusakabe Masaya answer the phone. No matter what, we must make sure if Kusakabe is alive or not. If we're lucky, we might even be able to confirm his current location."

"Can we talk to dad?"

Blocking Meo who was about to go forward, Yondaime said:

"Wait. Do you mean we don't negotiate with these people? Just directly barge in and save him?"

"Unfortunately, that's correct."

"It's not that simple. Don't look down on Tabara-gumi, this is different from ambushing them on the road. Don't be so ridiculous even if you want to borrow our strength, I can't let my underlings get caught."

"Anyways, we must first make sure of Kusakabe's location, then we can decide if we want to fight or not."

Yondaime gnashed his teeth.

"Sou-san, I'm coming in."

The door opened, and Pole poked his head inside.

"There's this thing in front of the entrance."

A small box entangled with tape was held in Pole's hand.

"What's that?"

"It says 'Kusakabe' on the lid."

Yondaime's expression changed immediately after hearing that, and he snatched the box. He placed the box on the cardboard box table and tore down the tape.

After he looked at the contents of the box, his brows twitched. When Alice and Meo was about to check it out, Yondaime immediately closed the box.

"Don't look!"

"What are you doing?"

"..... Don't look."

It's more abnormal for Yondaime to be able to stay calm. Hiro's face was pale, and I think I might be the same..... That's because I could clearly see the contents of the box from my position.

The box was filled with the phone that I saw with Kusakabe Masaya, and there was also a human ear stained with blood.

My hand tightly holding my knee could not move. They're serious..... Tabara-gumi is serious about this.

"What's inside?"

"An ear."

Alice hesitated.

The phone rang, and my throat felt as if it's being pulled at.

"Major, get it for me."

Yondaime caught the cordless phone that Major threw over. Major connected the phone to the computer, letting the computer speaker blare out the conversation.

"This is Hirasaka-gumi."

'I sent you a present. Is the girl over there?'

Meo was about to stand up, but I stopped her.

"Is Kusakabe still alive?"

'I feel like letting him talk to his daughter while his other ear is still here.'

Major took a sleek, silver object and threw it to Yondaime. After picking it up, Yondaime stuck it to the receiver with a small piece of tape. It was an IC recorder. So Major planned to record the conversation. Understanding Major's nimble actions in a flash, Yondaime sure has acute senses.

"Kusakabe's daughter is by my side right now, do you want her on the phone?"

'Tell her to pick up the phone.'

Yondaime wordlessly handed the receiver to Meo, while Meo took it with her hands trembling slightly.

"I'm..... Meo."

There was a silence at the other side of the phone for a moment.

Then, the hoarse voice of a man came from the phone, and it was familiar. Oh yeah, I heard it that dawn outside the hut, it was Kusakabe Masaya's voice.

'..... Idiot. Why haven't you escaped!'

"Dad!" Meo shouted: "Dad, are you alright!? Are yo okay!? Where are yo--"

'Shut up! Stop caring about me! Just get all the money that you want, get rid of the rest and escape to Thailand!'

"What are you talking about? How could I do such a thing....."

'You're not my child, I don't want to care about this!'

Oi, what are you talking about!? Angry shouts and sounds of fighting came from the other side of the phone. Even so, Kusakabe Masaya continued to shout:

'Haven't you realized yet? Your mother and I had a fake marriage. It's just for the sake of fooling the customs that we're living together, you're not even my daughter, so just get back to Thailand!'

"Bu- But, dad....."

'It's a waste of time and effort anyways. Things have ended, so don't meddle anymore!'

Kusakabe Masaya's voice became extremely solemn. A waste of time and effort? What does that mean? Since you risked the danger of being caught in the city, what are you trying to do?

Lastly, a loud shout in another language came from the other side of the phone, and it seemed like Kusakabe Masaya used all of his effort to shout that out. And what interrupted his voice after that was the sounds of something rolling about and angry shouts.

What? What did he say?

'Talking time with papa has ended, now you'll listen to me.' The man just now picked up the phone again.

"Let me..... Let me talk to dad!"

'Shut up! You just take the cash and the phone that we sent you just now to the entrance of Tomin Commercial Building. There would be people from our gang watching over there, and we'll keep in contact by phone that time.'

Yondaime snatched the phone from Meo's hands:

"Damn, what are you talking about! You're the ones forced to a corner, so don't get so cocky!"

'Blasted kid, shut up! Who are you to think that you can talk things out with us!? We're not playing around. If the girl doesn't come, I'll cut off a finger from Kusakabe's hands every two hours, and when there are no more--'

"NO!" Meo shouted.

At that moment, another commotion started from the other side of the phone. Shouts of a somewhat feminine male voice came:

'-- Hey, who are you calling? Didn't I tell you not to take action by yourself, listen to my orde--'

'Stop that noise!' 'Outsiders should shut up!'

'I'll call you later!' And he hung up immediately after saying that.

The room that was cold to the bones was only filled with sounds of weeping, and I only noticed at that moment that Meo was crying on my arm. The other parts of my body felt like a rusted machine, only the part that Meo was touching felt warm.

I felt so lifeless that I couldn't move.

"..... There seems to be arguments at the other side."

Hiro's words broke the silence.

"Letting Kusakabe Masaya on the phone, this is an inexplicably dumb action. It might be the actions of the small potatoes in Tabara-gumi taking action by themselves." Alice smiled, slightly pleased: "The recording just now could prove that Kusakabe Masaya did not defalcate the company. They probably never thought that we could record it immediately, I wouldn't have done that if it were me."

Indeed. Kusakabe Masaya ran away because his defalcation failed,

that's the version of the script that they want. It's obvious from the recording that he was imprisoned by someone, so the recording has the power to overthrow the whole script.

But Kishiwada-kai is different from the police, would they believe in things like evidence?

` The manipulator behind the scenes-- who is it? Is it the other person who gave orders to Tabara-gumi?

"What if we use the recording to force them to negotiate with us?"

Yondaime took down the IC recorder from the receiver.

"A pity, but it can't be done. After all, we can't negotiate in this matter, Tabara-gumi is definitely planning to kill Kusakabe Masaya."

"Then what should we do? We obviously have more trump cards than them, why do we still have to be limited?"

Yondaime made an impatient noise, while our gazes naturally fell on Meo.

The main reason that our options are so limited would be because of Meo's unauthorized actions. Maybe she felt the atmosphere, she deeply pressed her face on my arm.

"It's because I'm too proud, so that I can seek happiness for all people."

Alice said. Her words doesn't seem to be polite consolations for Meo. We raised the stakes ourselves, so we can't give up right now.

"Or we can do as Kusakabe says, just ignore him? Helping a woman to run away isn't that hard. Didn't you hear it just now? He didn't even want to be rescued."

After hearing Yondaime's words, Meo's shoulders trembled. At times like this, an inexplicable anger for Yondaime rose in my heart. Shut up! Don't deliberately say these things like they're confirmed.

'You're not even my kid.'

'We just got together to fool the customs.'

My anger even shifted to Kusakabe Masaya, who I never even met.

Stop joking! Everyone- everyone's trying to save you, how could you say such cruel words to Meo!?

He said things like that-- does Meo even want to save her father anymore?

The young girl tightly leaning against my arm stayed silent.

"Major, please rewind the recording. I want to listen to Kusakabe's words again to confirm something."

"Alice, stop that." I spoke for Meo. Listening to that again? It's too cruel. After glancing at me, Alice didn't answer. Major connected the IC recorder to the computer speaker and rewinded it a bit.

'-- you're not even my daughter, so just get back to Thailand!'

'It's a waste of time and effort anyways. Things have ended, so don't meddle anymore!'

The sound of Meo's crying intensified, and Kusakabe's suffocating voice came from the speaker at the last moment. Not Japanese, but some incomprehensible language, then a rough voice drowned it. I really couldn't look at Meo right now, and rose to turn off the recorder; but Major switched it off one step quicker.

The awkward silence stung as if there were metal fragments mixed in the air.

Only Alice was indifferent to that, nodded and said:

"-- I understand now. So that's how things stand."

"What do you know?" Hiro asked: "I think he said something at the last moment....."

"It's Thai. Just like that, all the matters have been tied up."

For some reason, Alice's expression made people feel refreshed.

I shifted my gaze from Alice to Meo, while she buried her face in her hands.

"What is--"

"We can't say for the moment."

Alice rapidly interrupted me.

"And I might never be able to speak of this matter. And also, if we can't save Kusakabe Masaya, this sentence would be brought to the grave with him."

Don't talk like that. I know that even if you don't say so.

"To save a person that doesn't want to be saved, this isn't our style." Hiro said with a hoarse voice.

"But even so, my client isn't Kusakabe Masaya." Alice said: "His stubbornness does not concern me. His despair, lies, excuses, abandonment, giving up, all of them cannot hinder the truth on my hands. I will definitely rescue him without so much of a scratch."

✻

Alice went back to Hanamaru Ramen Shop on Hiro's car, while almost all the lackeys were out to check out Tabara-gumi's strongholds. The only people left were Yondaime, Pole, Rocky, Major and I. As for Meo, we left her in the study to cool down.

Looking at the clock in the office, it was already over noon; the long Thursday was only half over. Cutting off a finger every two hours-- what a random threat, Yondaime even laughed at that. But I couldn't laugh.

Major occupied the sofa of the office, calling someone while saving the recording to the computer with one hand, then said after stuffing his notebook-sized computer into his backpack:

"Alice would definitely be able to check out the phone log just now, but most probably it'll be from a handphone, so we wouldn't know the location just now."

"Does that mean our only clue left is the recording?"

"That's right. I know someone in the Coast Guards who knows how to use the sonar, so I'm planning to ask him to check out if there's anything that we can use as evidence. But there's only one day left, so I don't know if it would be on time."

"Ten fingers would mean twenty hours-- one day left. If the threat

was real, then we must find the location for Kusakabe Masaya's confinement in a day, think of a plan and barge in to save him.

"I could confirm the pathway of our invasion of time is sufficient, but we don't even know where he is right now."

"But didn't we lock on to two places now? Can't we start monitoring from now?"

"But that would be assuming that he's imprisoned at the offices of Tabara-gumi, right? There are countless places that could be used to imprison someone. If they just imprison him in a basement of any building, we wouldn't be able to find him."

I bit my lips. Indeed, the only evidence that can be traced to Kusakabe Masaya is only the IC recorder in Major's pocket.

"Weren't there some people arguing at the back? Something like outsiders shut up, so there might be people not from the gang present at that time."

I felt an electric current flowing through my body.

A panicked voice of a young man. A person not from the gang.

"Major, lend me the recorder for a sec."

"What do you want to do with it?"

Lazy to even explain, I just took out my phone and called Yi Ling-san.

"..... Ah, it's me. Sorry for yesterday. Eh? Ah, it's okay. Can you....."

I felt my voice getting louder:

"Yi Ling-san, would you be able to recognise Director Mikawa's voice..... That's right, we have one. Please listen to this recording."

Major widened his eyes in surprise. I snatched the IC recorder from his hands, then pressed the play button while pressing it to the receiver.

I hung up after thanking Yi Ling-san, then immediately called Alice. My voice trembled when I wan explaining, and my tongue became rather slow because of excitement.

'..... I understand. I'll ask Hiro to keep an eye on Mikawa's side. Ask Yondaime to send a few people from Hirasaka-gumi to Mikawa's home.'

I'm not sure if it's just me, but I felt that Alice was rather excited at the other side of the phone as well. When I was about to turn to Yondaime, he already picked up the phone on the table to give orders to his lackeys. He's quick!

And then, Rocky pushed open the steel door with energy that almost tore the door apart, and rushed in. Major already left for about ten minutes.

"Sou-san, they sent something else again!"

Yondaime snatched the coffee colored envelope from Rocky's hands. The word 'Kusakabe' that was written outside the paper with marker pen looked blurry due to something oozing out from the bag.

When the tape was torn down, something like a coffee colored caterpillar rolled out from it. A strangled sound came from my parched throat.

It was a whole, cut out finger.

Yellowish bones could be seen in the dried blood, and my vision suddenly blurred. "A- Aniki, are you alright!?" Rocky supported me, who nearly fainted, and brought me to the sofa. While sitting on the sofa, a sense of wanting to puke came upon me.

"Did you see who sent this?" Yondaime threw the finger back to the paper bag and asked.

"No. They stuck it to the mailbox with tape."

"Hmph! Gutless people. Do you think I'll get scared just like that?"

Gutless? This is gutless?

I really don't know how insensitive Yondaime is.

I raised my head to look at the clock, indeed, it has been two hours and thirty minutes from that time. They're serious.

"Oi, Gardening Club kid. Don't get scared just from these meaningless performances."

"His fingers might all be cut off, how is this gutless!?" I unknowingly stood up and shouted.

"Calm down, it's impossible that they would do that."

"Why can you still say thi--!"

I didn't even see Yondaime's fists coming. The more surprising thing is, I almost didn't feel a hint of pain at all. I just felt that my body became weightless, then I fell onto the sofa with a plunk. Bouts of pain gradually came from my chest, then I realized that I was punched in the heart.

"I don't think your job is to scream blue murder over here, is it?"

The eyes of the wolf gazed directly at me.

"Do you understand? We can't just take action as soon as we know the location of Kusakabe. Some things can't be handled just by getting a crowd. Listen, I'm only helping because that girl is your friend."

Yondaime forcibly pressed my shoulders onto the sofa and said:

"Think of some other way, bro."

When I walked into the study, Meo was hugging her Boston bag on the bed, facing the walls, unmoving. I sat down in front of the turned on computer.

Did she hear all that I shouted out just now? I thought while looking at Meo's back. I'm just too careless. I could not tell her the matter about the finger being sent here, or she might just rush out again.

I'll have to think of some other way.

I repeatedly thought of Yondaime's words. I couldn't think of anything. As Alice said, they don't have any wish of negotiation.

But if we continue to hide Meo like this, ignoring their wishes, what would happen then? Their condition is actually quite troublesome as well, so should we collect information as soon as possible when both parties are in trouble? I shook my head to fling out the thought that was too good to be true. These matters are just impossible. The opponents of Tabara-gumi aren't just us, if

Kusakabe fell into Kishiwada-kai's hands alive, that would be fatal. They planned to kill him from the start. Might they have already killed him after the phone call? Cutting down fingers from a corpse would probably be easy. As my imagination kept running away to an exaggerated and bad side, I pressed my thumb onto my thigh with force.

Is there a simpler way of knowing the place of his confinement? Oh yeah, Mikawa isn't a yakuza, so threats might work on him. He probably goes to work almost everyday, so it's easier to find him as well. If we kidnapped Mikawa and used him as a hostage, would that be better? That won't work, from the phone just now, Mikawa seems to be powerless, Tabara-gumi seems to have all the power.

Suddenly noticing that I easily thought of ways like threats or kidnapping, I felt scared of myself. I looked at my palms. Right now, I might already be numb of my daily life. Or maybe I should just rush out myself, give Mikawa a punch and kidnap him? That's not so, I probably just want to ask people from Hirasaka-gumi to do it? Self-disgust welled up in me. I obviously can't do anything myself, and even so--

I raised my head because I felt a gaze on me.

Meo was silently looking at my face. Trails of tears were still on her face.

Having her father say that to her, being sad is inevitable.

And even so-- does she still want to save him?

Oi, Meo. Things that have been damaged can never recover to it's original state. Even if you and your father met again by some miracle, the dream that you'll be a family again has already completely disappeared.

And the kind big sisters living at Hello Palace can't live in Japan anymore. Everyone's lives have been destroyed.....

But Meo just smiled while shaking her head:

"There's nothing that can't be recovered, it's just that Mr. Assistant doesn't know it."

"..... Mnn, I don't know. I don't know what Meo is talking about."

The last words that Kusakabe Masaya said.

Those words-- are they the key? The thing that he wanted to do. His feelings.

But for some reason, I couldn't pursue the matter anymore.

"Even Miss Detective doesn't know about some things. I heard it that time, she said that she doesn't know why Dad wants me to hide with the money."

At that time-- the contents of the conversation Alice had with me. So she heard all that?

'--Among them, the only inexplicable choice is to tell Meo to hide the two hundred million yen, and hide himself as well.'

This is the mystery that continues to tie Alice to the case.

"I know the reason."

I blankly stared at Meo's lips.

"I know why. Just as Meo love Dad, Dad loves Meo as well."

Why?

Why is this girl so--

"..... Having such cruel words said to you, do you still want to save your father?"

"Yeah." Meo threw the Boston bag down the bed, at the side of my foot. "I don't want the money, I just want Dad to come back."

At this moment, something started to link up in my heart.

Just want dad to be back.

That's what she wanted. Why did I make things so complicated?

The context is simple.

It's okay if Kusakabe Masaya could just come back.

And the money is now in my hands. The two hundred million yen--

Kishiwada-kai, Mikawa, Hello Corporation, money laundering.

These factors resounded in my mind, intercrossed, and formed a concrete shape.

The road that was so zigzagging and roundabout that it was stupid became straight. Will this really work? I poured water into the waterway in my mind to test it out. The first problem is time. Today is Thursday, and it's already two in the afternoon. There's still tomorrow left. It would be barely in time. Next up is the number of people. Though I have next to no friends, I could still borrow Hiro and Yondaime's strengths. That's right, I could also ask Yi Ling-san and the others for help. Of course, there are some flaws in this. I should say that there's a lot of flaws. But Alice and Major should be able to close up the loopholes. Lastly, I could only rely on Tetsu-senpai's fists.

The rest is the arguments and timing.

I stood up. The trembling of my knees are no longer caused by fear.

"..... Mr. Assistant?"

Meo looked at me, confused, while I nodded in answer:

"If you don't want it, then I'll take it then."

"..... What?"

"I'll spend it all, all of the two hundred million yen."

Temporarily ignoring the wide-eyed Meo, I picked up my phone. Even my fingers pressing the buttons were trembling in excitement. Calm down, I need to calm down.

"Is it Alice? I'm going to tell you my plan right now. If there are parts that are too far-fetched, please say so."

'Plan? What are you talking about?'

Interrupting the words of the impatient NEET detective, I started to explain my plan. The feverish mutterings were fragmented at times, but the words continued to gush out form my mouth. It's as if they weren't thought out by myself. It might be possible that at this moment, I'm just reading out the contents in God's notebook word by word.

"..... How is it?"

Saying all of them almost in one breath, I asked her opinion and started to pant. Alice answered in a voice full of reluctance:

'Many parts are just too far-fetched, it's quite a wonder that you could think of a plan that's so stupid.'

At that moment, darkness appeared before me.

"But--"

And this time, Alice was the one to interrupt me..

'But I'll help you to handle the far-fetched parts. Just do it. You're in charge of the front-line commands, while my mission is just to hack in, right?'

I gazed at the ceiling and heaved a long sigh. If I relax right now, I'll feel so happy that I'll shout (even in front of Meo).

"Yeah. Please make a large-scale ruckus."

'I just have two requests.'

"What is it?"

'The first is the matter about the remittance into the accounts.'

The orders that Alice gave me that moment wasn't something that I could easily understand.

"..... Why must we do that? They'll know of the details easily like that."

'They don't have that much time to check the accounts and the sum of money.'

"But we don't need to do that even the--"

'I already know what Kusakabe Masaya wants to do.'

After hearing Alice's words, I stayed silent.

The thing that Kusakabe Masaya wanted to do- the only mystery that tied Alice to the case.

The matter-- finally had an answer.

But how is that connected to the inexplicable things that she wants me to do?

'I can't explain right now.'

"Yet again! You do that every time!"

'About this matter, the difference between the truth and the facts won't be a problem. And I cannot explain the reason that I cannot explain this. So just follow my instructions about the remittance of money into the accounts.'

It just gets more and more muddled. Feeling Meo's worried gaze at the side, I repeatedly stood up and sat down again on the bed because of impatience.

'Narumi, didn't I discuss with you about the helplessness of a NEET detective before this?'

Alice continued to say, as if tightly holding the receiver:

'I am a NEET detective, I don't have the power to protect or to help people from birth, and I probably wouldn't have the power to do so in my life. Because that was written in my page of God's notebook. Even so, Even if that's so, Narumi.....'

I suddenly thought, is she crying? Alice is crying? How is that possible? But listening to the voice that was gradually growing weaker, it was like my throat was throttled by someone.

'There are times that I have to bleed, letting my blood mix with old, dry bones, pulling myself back to the borders of the world. Even if it's a fake magic that is meaningless to people other than me..... Do you understand what I mean?'

Of course I don't understand. I stayed silent. I just felt that if I said something that I shouldn't without thinking, Alice would devastated at the other side of the phone.

"..... I understand. I'll follow your instructions."

After awhile, it was like I saw Alice smiling at the other side of the phone.

'You're really bad at lying, you know. Even though I can't see your face, I know that from your voice.'

"*So* sorry for that. What's your second request?"

'You must remember to return the Boston bag to Meo.'

My jaw dropped, and I looked at the Boston bag by my leg.

"..... Why? Well, it doesn't matter, but is there anything else inside?"

'Yeah, all the answers are inside.'

I couldn't say a word. I don't understand at all. Alice's answer told me that she didn't want to explain anymore. Besides, it would just feel like dumb questions if I continued to ask, so I answered in a small voice: "Got it."

At the instant when I was about to hang up, I heard some rather rare words. Alice apologized.

'Sorry, I think I'm looking at you somewhat differently now. Thank you.'

I stared at the now silent phone for awhile. It feels as if Alice's slight warmth was on it.

My conclusion is, about Alice's thoughts and the feelings entangling her, I couldn't understand a thing.

Even so-- she still believed in my words as her assistant.

That's why I need to trust her as well.

"Are you serious?"

When I reported to Yondaime right after I walked out of the study, that was his reaction. Pole and Rocky said something like: "Erm, aniki..... Can you explain it again?" "Forget it, idiots like us can't understand aniki's great plan."

"Indeed, an odd detective would have a strange assistant."

Yondaime narrowed his eyes that were sleek like a wolf, and scratched his porcupine-like hair.

"How many people do you need?"

"Well, as much as possible, because there's two hundred million

yen. Ah, but we need people who have an identity card and an account. They must also be people who would listen to instructions and accept it....."

"I know that, who do you think I am!"

"And then..... Lastly, people who can use force....."

Yondaime turned over and ordered Pole and Rocky behind him:

"Get a car that can't be traced, then find four people other than you two."

"Understood! We're going to barge into enemy territory, right?" "I'll go hone my manly aura right away!"

After the two walked out of the room, Yondaime glanced at the door of the study and said quietly:

"To Kusakabe, being caught by the people from Tabara-gumi might be better."

I gulped, then raised my head to look at Yondaime.

I have this feeling too. Though I don't know why, I just felt that Kusakabe Masaya didn't want us to save him. Is it connected to the reason that he stayed in the city while risking his own life?

"If so, our enemies are not only Tabara-gumi, but himself as well. Understand?"

After hesitating for a moment, I nodded.

'Narumi, you're becoming more and more like Alice.'

Those were the first words that Hiro said to me after hearing my explanation on the phone. They said that again. I'm like Alice? How?

'Especially the point that you'll talk nonsense seriously. But it feels quite fun. Okay, I'll tell the girls that I know. Any other things that I can help out with?'

"Erm..... As we need to know where Mikawa would go tomorrow....."

'Got it. I'll keep an eye on him, so just relax.'

'Vice Admiral Fujishima is probably a land-type. After boasting a whole lot of grand ambitions, then cooperating to dispatch manpower, this type of thinking is really incomprehensible to marine-type people like me.'

To me, what Major said was more incomprehensible to me. What does marine-type mean?

'Then what's my mission?'

"This is actually a precautionary step, to block telephone communications. Can you do that?"

"Oh, I see, so you want them to be unable to confirm with the phone. This isn't hard, but don't you know where Mikawa would be that day? Where should I block the telephone?'

"I'm guessing that he might be at the company, but I'm not sure yet."

Ah, no, wait. If Mikawa's phone couldn't call, he wouldn't be able to give orders, then can the plan still proceed? I felt a chill because of the rashness of my plan. Major said at that moment:

'Mnn? Then wouldn't it be okay if I just block the bank's phones?'

Ah..... That's right.

I never thought about it, but it's actually much better.

Indeed, I can't do anything alone, it's a good thing that Major was here. But I couldn't just frankly express my gratitude, but said something like this:

"Major, it seems that you're only good at thinking about these things."

'I'm not as good as Vice Admiral Fujishima. We'll meet again at Yasukuni Shrine!'

Explaining the plan so that the clueless Yi Ling-san would understand was really quite a trial.

'To be honest, I'm still not too clear about the current situation.'

"I'm really sorry, I can't explain all of it to you."

It's hard to explain the details on the phone, and I don't really want Yi Ling-san and the others to know about the criminal part of this.

'All of this is for Meo, right?'

"That's right."

'I understand. I'll explain things to the people in our building. Though it might be slightly late, I'll tell you how many people are willing to help today.'

"Ah, it's okay no matter how late."

I'll have to stay up all night today anyways.

That night, Meo and I poured all the money in the bag onto the table, then packed them up in envelopes.

Hiro and Yondaime gathered more people than I could imagine. Thinking that I'm involving hundreds of people in this stupid plan, my hands filling the envelopes stared to tremble.

During the last stage, my fingers and brain started to numb. Staring at the countless Fukuzawa Yukichis on the countless ten thousand yen notes in a dark room alone with Meo, my thoughts that time were that two hundred million yen seems to be not as much as I imagined. Divided by two hundred, it'd be a million, and it'll be ten thousand if we divide it by two thousand. If we just divide it by two hundred million, it'll be just one! I think I'm having late symptoms. In reality, the sum of money can't be obtained even if the office workers in Japan work for a lifetime.

That is why, people would die for the money.

The phone in the office would ring every few hours, and Yondaime tightly closed the door of the study so that we won't hear him answering. They wouldn't have killed Meo's father because of impatience, would they? I tried not to think of the pain and terror of having fingers cut off one after another. I definitely can't let Meo see through me.

The last job of the day was to think of an 'explanation' for a hundred people.

There must be a reason for the money to flow.

I must do this.

I don't know if the plan would succeed. I whole-heartedly prayed that Kusakabe Masaya's miracle would still be present.

Chapter 6

The next morning, I brought the money to Hello Palace myself. Besides cooling myself off with the cold air of the morning, I felt that I must thank Yi Ling-san personally.

"Ah, you're here, come in."

Yi Ling-san pulled me into the room after opening the door.

In the house that had two rooms and a hall, big for a single lady, there were about ten women in it. Because of the indescribable fragrance in the room, I could only stand blankly at the door. Some of them were even wearing sexy clothing, as if they just finished working. Their skin colors and outlines looked somewhat different, just like I'm looking at a thumbnail of Asia. Of course, Jennifer and Hua-san were among them.

"So sorry, asking you people to help out with the strange problem."

Yi Ling-san forcefully slapped my cringing back.

"But we don't feel troubled about it. We just need to bank in the money, right?"

I nodded, distributing the envelopes with the money in it while saying.

"Do we have to bank them into our own accounts, then change it to another account?" Hua-san asked.

"Ah, that's right. From the sum of money, you might not be able to bank them in using an ATM machine."

"Though I don't know what you're trying to do, do your best!"

"You're doing this to save Kusakabe-san, right?"

"Meo and Kusakabe-san are in your hands!"

Being requested like that by the different people, a sudden happiness welled up in me, and I nodded.

"Well, that's all for now. The people from Hirasaka-gumi would be here later."

"To give you the receipt, right?" Yi Ling-san said. She's indeed quick, so it's quite reassuring.

I called Yondaime after walking out of the building.

'My side is finished.'

Isn't he a bit too quick!? I couldn't help but feel taken aback. Raising my head to look at the dark skies of April. It's just past six right now, so probably he finished distributing them late night? The young people in this city really don't sleep at night.

'We'll be able to collect all of the receipts before noon. When are you planning to attack?'

The timing is hard to grasp.

"Two."

'You really know how to dawdle. Then who's going to go?'

"What do you mean who's gonna go.....? Of course it's going to be me. We must tell them about it clearly, the only people who know about the plan clearly besides me is only Alice. You aren't planning to tell Alice to go, are you?"

'You should get this clear, we're going to the enemy headquarters. Think of how dangerous it would be. Do you think they'll just let you walk out in one piece after saying all that?'

"That's why we're going to contact Mikawa, and not Tabara-gumi. At least the yakuza wouldn't be too daring in the office of Hello Corporation, right?"

Yondaime stayed silent. I felt that I could heard sounds of teeth gnashing.

'I'm going too. Do you hear that?'

"Eh? But aren't you in charge of the action team?"

'Shut up! There wouldn't be any problem there. Wouldn't it be okay if we just meet up later? Stop fussing!'

He hung up, and I sighed while looking at the screen.

Well, it's true that the plan is rather far-fetched. But we can't just

inform them about it after sending over the information. This shallow method wouldn't work at all, there must be someone willing to charge inside.

The fact that Yondaime was willing to accompany me bolstered my confidence a bit.

I looked at the foggy sky. There's no room for us to turn back now.

'Mikawa is now at Hello Corporation. The senior executives are at work now.'

At eleven in the morning, Hiro sent the news. At that time, I had already returned to the NEET Detective Agency.

"Nobody else is with him? For instance, people from Tabara-gumi?"

'No, just him. He can't just bring bodyguards to work, right?'

He has a point. That's good.

Turning my head around to took at the side of the bed, Alice was already giving orders to Major through the phone, probably because she heard the conversation between Hiro and I.

"..... Mnn, we'll do it at Hello Corporation as planned. Please prepare to obstruct the phone signal..... Hmm? No, the starting time is two in the afternoon. Standby before that."

She put down her phone and turned to me:

"We're counting down now, are you ready?"

I gave her the thumbs up. A screen among the many screens hung on the walls behind the pajamas-clad Alice showed the bomb that Alice cooked up for Hello Corporation's system.

The red color painted on the whole screen. The abstract picture of the man with the little finger cut off his right hand and his right ear cut off. Though I finished it in just half an hour, I felt that it was actually quite good. Below these two pictures were large words: 2.00 p.m. , no other words.

The plan for saving Kusakabe Masaya would start at two in the afternoon.

The simple and clear symbols that only people who are in the know

would understand, is now shown on the screen of the computers in Hello Corporation after Alice hacked into the system of Hello Corporation through the loopholes in their firewalls.

The plan had started. I only noticed after quite some time that large amounts of sweat was trickling down my hand holding the phone.

It was already after noon when Yondaime brought a few of his underlings to the NEET Detective Agency. Large stacks of bank transaction records were taken out from bags or plastic bags and were placed in front of me. I'm starting to have a headache.

"I really should've asked you to sort them out first....."

"It's too late for you to say that!" Yondaime's attitude was cold.

After using nearly thirty minutes, we finally got out the receipts used only for reference from the stack of over five hundred transaction records. I was too careless. Things would always turn out like this if we think of ways to solve problems only when the problem arises.

After categorizing them, we filled the bank transaction records into the bag that we lent from Meo. Completely using up the two hundred million yen, leaving only papers recording the flow of money. Carrying the bag for awhile, it really felt much lighter than when it was filled with the twenty thousand pieces of ten thousand yen notes.

Unreliable-- but it's the only weapon that I have.

No, the true weapon is some other thing, right?

I stood up after picking up the bag.

"Well, I'm off." I told the silhouette wearing the teddy bear pajamas.

Alice turned her head over, kneeled on her bed and waved her hand, calling me over. Eh? What is it?

When I went closer to her, I was lightly patted on the head like another time before this, making me spring back almost two meters in surprise.

"Good luck."

That's quite a short sentence for Alice. And because of this, it

continued to linger in my ears.

"Hmm, what is it? You want it too, Yondaime?"

She suddenly moved forward, waving towards Yondaime, who was behind me.

"Stop dreaming."

"Ane-san, please pat us too!"

"Me too!"

"Stop that idiocy! We're moving out!"

On the large steel bucket behind the kitchen backdoor of the ramen shop, Tetsu-senpai was sitting there with a displeased expression on his face.

"Why am I the only one to be excluded....." He said deliberately in an audible voice.

"..... Nobody is excluding you."

"But you didn't even tell me the details."

"Didn't I tell you about that on the phone yesterday?" I even asked your help for the bank transactions.

"My mind is all muddled up, I really don't understand."

Oioi, is that really my fault? Did I do anything wrong?

"So I'll go along with Narumi, is that okay?"

"Erm..... But you'll have to stay in the action group."

"Can't we just meet up later?"

Why are those two so similar in these matters!? I turned my head over to look at Yondaime, who was leading his underlings down the stairs.

"Second Brother Tetsu is going too!?"

"Taking the strongest duo to charge into enemy ground, as expected of aniki!"

"We'll defeat all of the workers!"

The lackeys were excited after hearing senpai's words. No, no, are they misunderstanding something? We're not there to have a fight!

"Then we're going first!"

"Remember to change your clothes first, don't take action with the group emblem on."

"Understood!"

The lackeys rode their motorbikes and left.

"These guys really don't have a sense of crisis." Yondaime muttered. I agree with that too.

At that moment, Min-san poked her head out of the kitchen backdoor.

"Hey, do you want to have something to eat before going?"

"You probably haven't eaten lunch yet, right? Narumi, why are you walking so unsteadily? You should at least have a meal first."

There weren't any people in the shop though it was lunch time. From left to right, Yondaime, me and Tetsu-senpai sat on the seats. Bowls emitting white smoke were placed in front of us. There weren't any pieces of roast pork(chashu) on it, but thick slices of deep fried pork chop(tonkatsu).

"This is for good luck. (Note: Katsu(victory) is part of tonkatsu)" Min-san said. "You're probably going to take part in something dangerous again, right? Really, you're just kids, too."

I appreciate her thoughts, but who would ever put deep fried pork chop on noodles? This is really..... But we still silently picked up the chopsticks. The strongest person in the city would not be the ex-boxer or the young yakuza boss beside me, but--

"Ah, I deducted the fee for the meal from Narumi's pay."

So she's not treating us!

Using the chopsticks to slowly pick up the pork chop on top of the ramen, I realized that the soup of the ramen was stuffed full of pepper and garlic. Uwaa! I almost had a nosebleed just by seeing it.

Sneaking a peek at Yondaime and senpai's bowl, I saw that theirs were just ordinary soupd. Why do I have to undergo this torture? Are you really telling me to eat all this!?

"You, have you forgotten what I told you? Didn't I tell you not to meddle in this?"

Min-san leaned over from the other side of the counter and came closer to my face. She caught hold of my chin, showing a cold smile that could even eat up a tiger. I froze, opening and closing my mouth again like a fish. I really did forget what she said. That's bad, I'm going to get eaten up.

"Listen closely, you- have- to- finish- all- of- them."

With a tone like she's holding a red hot metal stick to threaten me, Min-san released my face only after she said all that.

"Tetsu, Sou, he's my employee. Don't let him get hurt."

"We know."

The two people who had speedily finished their pork chop ramen answered at the same time.

✻

We reached the opposite of the office of Hello Corporation after passing through the Shuto Expressway at one forty five, slightly earlier than the scheduled time. Yondaime parked his 'Smart' car by the road.

Looking at the five-storey building from the window of the car, it felt even larger than it was yesterday. No, calm down, this isn't a big company at all, and the people supporting them are just a bunch of small potatoes; and the plan that I'm going to execute isn't a large bet at all.

I leaned my back on the seat and heaved a large sigh. Ah, this is bad, my heartbeat is accelerating.

"Hey, aren't you going down?"

Tetsu-senpai said while sitting on the backseat:

"My current posture is very uncomfortable."

"You're the one who wanted to come."

Yondaime retorted with an annoyed voice:

"I never planned to bring three people, idiot."

Smart is actually a small, two-person car, but Tetsu-senpai just squeezed into the back of the car. I answered while trying to recover my breathing rate:

"We can't be too early. That'll give them an opportunity to think. We have to wait till two."

"Why must it be two?"

"Because the bank closes at three. I think that an hour would be the most suitable time..... Though it's just my intuition."

"How is this related to the time that the bank closes?"

"Well....."

Didn't I tell you on the phone yesterday!? I really did explain it!

I was about to think of something simple to say, indicating that it's already two. "Let's go!" Yondaime opened the door after saying that, and kicked me out to the road.

There weren't any services like a lady waiting at the counter to welcome us. Only a phone was in front of the glass doors of the office, used to ask about the appointment status.

"Hello, is Director Mikawa in? No, we don't have an appointment."

The person at the other side of the phone seemed somewhat harried. That couldn't be helped, as Alice already hacked into all of the systems in the company and froze them.

'Excuse me, but who are you?'

Yondaime snatched the receiver from my hands:

"Just tell him that I'm Hinamura Soichiro."

The effect was instantaneous, and we were invited inside immediately. Should I become more anti-social as well?

"Listen, Tetsu. Don't take action first."

"Same to you."

Tetsu-senpai brushed the comment away lightly and pushed open the glass doors.

A nervous man of about forty was sitting on the sofa of the reception room, waiting for us to walk in. It was the man that I saw yesterday-- Mikawa. But not only Mikawa was in the room. The person standing who was standing at the other side of the conference table, beside the windows was a man wearing a pair of light brown shades and two other men wearing similar attires. When I saw the scene, I couldn't help but to stand at the entrance, shocked.

So we still can't completely avoid coming in contact with Tabara-gumi. Probably Mikawa called them here after seeing the computer screens? Hiro can't grasp the locations of both Mikawa and Tabara-gumi alone, blast!

Yondaime pushed me into the room.

Shades observed our faces in turn, and showed an eerie smile, but he didn't speak. In contrast, Mikawa seemed to be rather flustered:

"You're the ones who did that?"

Not a word of greeting, not asking us to have a seat, he went straight to the point.

"Aren't you all just students? Why are you meddling in this?"

"Hinamura, haven't you heard what I said!?"

It seemed like Shades didn't want to pretend to be anyone else anymore, and he said in a low voice. The yakuza walked around the conference table and surrounded us.

"Damn, why are you holding the bag for? Do you think things will be alright if you just return the cash!?"

One of the yakuza hit the bag in my hands. My ears are starting to ring. This is bad, I feel like I'm going to faint because of anemia.

"We're not here to negotiate with you."

After saying that, Yondaime lightly pushed my back. I came to my senses, adjusted my breathing, then glared at Mikawa. That's right, just ignore Tabara-gumi for now.

"I've brought the things that you wanted, Mikawa-san."

"What? Where's the girl!?"

"Hey, don't start a fight! We're in the company!" Mikawa said, flustered. "Please stop talking, I'll handle this."

Tetsu-senpai pushed away the men in black suits, allowing me to sit on the sofa opposite to Mikawa. The sofa made of synthetic leather was colder than I thought. It felt as if my heart was going to melt, flowing out of my ears.

From now on-- it's my battle, nobody would help me anymore.

I placed the Boston bag at the center of the glass table.

"Just the money wouldn't do, bring the girl." Mikawa's attitude

became rough. I shook my head:

"Let's talk about the money first. I've already handed the two hundred thousand yen to you."

"What?"

"I didn't bring the cash. Don't you have a guild formed from foreign workers? I banked in all the money into the account of the guild."

"What are you talking about?"

A sense of stickiness could be heard in Mikawa's voice, and his pale face started to redden.

"It's impossible for you to bank them in! It's two hundred million, how do you tell that to the person at the counter? The lies of kids without common sense are indeed absurd."

Is that so? Then you would probably understand from now on, what absurd things that kids like this can do in a large group.

I opened the zipper of the Boston bag.

"I didn't save them all in at the same time."

I took out a stack of receipts inside and scattered them on the table. Mikawa took out one of them and read it out, then his face paled immediately. Another, and another..... After confirming the accounts on the paper, Mikawa's face became deathly pale.

"..... Wha- What is this!?"

"It's because we know a lot of people. They just have to go to the bank and bank them in. All of them were quite willing to help."

"Idiot, why did you do that--"

"And also, not only this....." I interrupted Mikawa's words, striking while he's weak: "The money would probably flow overseas or to Kishiwada-kai, right? So we've eliminated the need for you."

Our last trump card. I took out a document from my pocket and showed it to Mikawa, and he took it with trembling hands, reading the contents again and again. Seeing his eyes moving uneasily, I could clearly see what he was doing.

"Wh....."

"We've dealt with it, and about next Monday, they'll transfer the two hundred million yen from the account of the guild to the account of the chairman of Kishiwada-kai as a donation."

"Idiot, how could you do that? It's a personal account, and the one who owns the account is Kusakabe!"

Mikawa was in a hysterical state.

"Oi, what did you people do! What is the meaning of this!?"

Originally standing silently at a side, Shades started to become agitated as well. My heartbeat was already so loud that even I, myself, was almost unable to hear what I said. Now's the time, it'll be okay after we finish this.

"So I advise you to learn more about internet security. Though it would probably be hard for people whose computer systems are hacked into so easily to understand all this." Every time I said another sentence, my dry mouth would feel bouts of pain: "The system in the bank is connected through the internet as well. As long as they're connected through the internet, there's nothing that a hacker can't do. Transferring the money wouldn't even need the confirmation of the owner of the account."

"How can this be!? I- if something like this really happened--"

I completely ignored Mikawa's words, picked up the bag and stood up. We've played all our cards, so it's time to leave.

"Don't move! Do you mean that you're running away just like that!?"

"That's exactly what we mean, scram."

"Don't spit, squirt."

Tetsu-senpai and Yondaime protected me at my side.

"What are you doing!"

The sound of collision echoed in my stomach. Yondaime who was punched in the face, Tetsu-senpai who was hit in the stomach with a knee, both of them didn't even flinch, but instead, I cowered on the floor with my eyes closed even though I wasn't hit. A trail of blood trickled down from the corner of Yondaime's mouth.

The yakuza took a step back in surprise though they're the ones who took action first. The man in the light brown shades widened his eyes, while Mikawa- sitting on the sofa- looked even more surprised. Even so, he still said:

"Wait a minute, you haven't finished yet, why are you doing such a meaningless thing!?"

"I've finished. We're just here to tell you that."

So that they wouldn't notice my trembling hands, I stuck my hands to the back and answered:

"The transaction will occur on Monday, do you understand? Please release Kusakabe-san before that time. Just handing you the money is too dangerous for us, so we chose to do that."

After I finished saying that, I walked past the chair and out of the reception room. "Wait, you people! Don't joke with us!" The angry roars of Shades were blocked by Yondaime, the last one to walk out.

"Let's go back."

While walking past the female employee who looked at us with a scared expression on her face, we ran in the corridors of the building. It was only after I rushed out of the glass door, that I noticed that my forehead and back was drenched in a large amount of sweat.

"Damn, I'll kill those people the next time I see them!" Yondaime said while wiping away the blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Things haven't finished yet, right? Don't lower your guard."

I bit my lips and nodded after hearing Tetsu-senpai's words, then the three of us ran down the stairs.

✻

"Oh yeah, Narumi. Why were those people so flustered?"

Tetsu-senpai's voice came from the back of the car. The Smart Yondaime was driving avoided the road in a traffic jam, then

zigzagged through the complex alleys quite quickly.

"Because I told them that I donated the two hundred million yen to Kishiwada-kai."

Do they understand when I put it that way? I'm a bit worried.

"Which means, if I moved the money in that way, the National Tax Department would notice it immediately. They'll know after checking it out that the account is connected to Hello Corporation. After they start investigating, the method of their money laundering might be noticed. The thing that they want to protect is not the two hundred million yen, but Kishiwada-kai."

"Wha--?" Tetsu-senpai made an unsure sound: "So you wanted to expose their illegal activities, right?"

"It's not like that."

If we just wanted to expose them, it'll be quicker to call the police. But NEET detectives are not polices. They just do their best to complete their client's request.

"We're here."

The Smart was parked at the borders of the large parking lot. Looking like he doesn't have much space, Tetsu-senpai stretched his head from the back to my side to look outside the windows. Flat buildings were at the opposite of the large space.

"..... The bank?"

"That's right. The branch where Kusakabe Masaya opened his guild account."

I noticed a white van parked at the other side of the parking lot.

"Isn't that Hirasaka-gumi's van?" Tetsu-senpai seemed to have noticed it as well. Yondaime took out his phone:

"We're here. I see you. Standby to rush out at any moment."

After the simple message, he didn't hang up.

"Oi, Narumi. I don't get it, hurry up and explain! What have you done!?"

Tetsu-senpai shouted in my ears.

"Shut up, Tetsu! Keep quiet!" Yondaime said. So that he can give orders at any moment, he didn't hang up on the phone just now. I quietly explained again:

"The donation haven't started yet. I told them that the transaction would occur first thing next Monday. It's Friday today, so the bank is going to end its business this week. If the money is donated, the National Tax Department would get to know about it. What would you do if you are Mikawa?"

"..... Think of ways to cancel the transaction."

"That's correct. But the thing is, *Kusakabe Masaya is the owner of the account*."

"Ah....."

It seems that senpai finally understood.

But all of these are empty talk. If we aren't able to get the results that we anticipated, then it will still be meaningless. Looking at the watch on my hand, it was already two fifty. Again, I felt as if my gut was shrinking.

Would it be successful? Would there be any loopholes? Did I successfully say what I should have? While opening and closing my sweaty palms, I siletnly stared at the cars driving on the road. Not yet? They're not here yet? Maybe my method wasn't right, is it because my method was seen through?

"Hey, but how do you donate it? The owner of the account is Kusakabe, isn't that right? If he, himself, don't go, how could you transfer a sum of money like two hundred million yen?"

"Aren't you listening?" YOndaime said: "Alice probably did something about that."

Just at that moment.

A car-- a black van, drove into the parking lot. I nearly cried out loud. A large part at the rear of the van was caved in. It's undeniable that it was caused by the collision with the van of Hirasaka-gumi. I said a weak voice that sounded like breathing, and even more like I'm trying to control my heartbeat:

"Even if it's Alice, she can't do that."

My tongue is almost starting to tremble. Hacking into the information of the bank archives and moving the money in the account, such a serious matter-- no, Alice might really be able to do it. But we don't have the time, or even the need.

The door of the van was opened forcefully. The silhouettes who walked down were wearing gray suits or some rather filthy feather jackets, there were four..... no, five.

"What I did was just to bank in the two hundred million yen into the account. The others were just fabrications."

Yondaime looked at me disbelievingly for an instant.

That's right , most of them were just bluffs. The golden rule for lieing to other people-- mix in a lie in a lot of truths. Using over a hundred receipts of bank transactions, with a truth like this, I covered the lie after that.

Our aim is to ensure Kusakabe Masaya's safety. Because we don't know where he's imprisoned at, at can't charge into enemy territory; so it's better to just let them bring him to a certain place instead. Telling them that critical harm would be caused if Kusakabe Masaya didn't appear himself, with this reason--

"I think you wouldn't be a NEET in the future, but a fraud."

Yondaime muttered that, but I didn't listen closely to him. Yondaime shortly gave a command again to the phone, then the sound of the back compartment of the car came. The door of the driver's seat opened too, and the cold wind blew onto my face.

The fifth man walked down from the van. I saw his face from a photo before this, but he looks extremely fragile at the moment, the capable look on his face gone.

Meo's father.

At the other side, the doors of the Hirasaka-gumi's van opened, and some youngsters wearing shades, safety helmets and masks that blocked their faces walked down. In the tense atmospheere, at the silent world of the other side of the car window, the yakuza started to fight.

After that, I saw two other people rushing out from the driver's seat and the seat next to it from the black van, then my innards started to hurt like they're entangled by steel wires. They have six people too, and they're holding retractable batons. In a flash, two of the lackeys in Hirasaka-gumi were lying on the asphalt road, while Yondaime and Tetsu-senpai were grappling with two other enemies, and were bing pulled further from the black van. I opened the lock of the car. But when faint roars came from the slightly open door, I froze. What could I do if I go? I can't help out with anything anyways.

The two staying near the van grabbed Kusakabe Masaya's collar, trying to pull him back into the van. That wouldn't do, it'll be game over if he's back on the van, there wouldn't be a second chance. I forcefully pushed open the door, rolling down onto the floor of the parking lot, piteous shouts and sounds of fighting came into my ears. At a distance of more than ten meters from the van, my legs- my legs couldn't move at all.

Just at that moment, my gaze met with Kusakabe Masaya's for an instant, separated by some distance.

All that surfaced from his expression were the two words: give up.

He sighed while giving in to their pulls to get back into the car. What's with him! At least try to resist a bit? We're here to save you, don't you understand!? While shouting in an incomprehensible language, I ran. In the hopeless distance between the van and I, the yakuza on the car were about to close the door. It's over, we can't make it--

"--DAD!"

A sudden shout came from a young girl in this tense situation. Coffee colored wind. I have absolutely no idea where Meo's delicate body flew out from. It was as though her outstretched hand pierced through the body of the black car, poking into the seams of the van that was about to close.

The sounds of bone fracturing echoed over to my position, while Meo couldn't even scream. A yakuza walked over and roughly pulled on her braids, planning to pull away from the van. Stop it! Stop it!

Just at that moment, the shrill shout of a man came from inside the black van. I planned to leap towards the yakuza holding Meo's hair,

but was knocked down by him, and rolled on the asphalt road while seeing the next scene.

The door of the black van springed open, only to see the men in gray suits kicked out of the van and the hand of the man that Meo was holding with her arms.

"Dad!"

In the confusing screams, for some reason, only Meo's voice was the clearest. Jumping down from the car, Kusakabe Masaya used the opportunity to knock down the yakuza grabbing his daughter's hair, while that guy's body rolled towards me and flattened me into pancake.

I don't really remember what happened after that moment.

I vaguely remember that Tetsu-senpai and Pole carried the father and daughter to the white van of Hirasaka-gumi; while I dimly remember Yondaime shouting in my ears as well.

When I woke up, I was already stuffed into the seat beside the driver's seat in the Smart. The ringing in my ears kept spreading to somewhere near my waist, and my scratched right cheek felt hot and wet, and even my breathing wasn't smooth.

On the driver's seat, Yondaime seemed to be panting as well. The Smart suddenly accelerated, while the time that passed in my heart seemed to feel the acceleration as well. Vigorously turning the steering wheel, then both the white and black vans vanished from my vision. When he drove to the driveway, the nostalgic sound of the city surrounded me.

As if being absorbed by the accelerating car, my heartbeat slowly, gradually slowed.

"..... Erm, where is Tetsu-senpai?"

It felt like my voice was somewhat fuzzy.

"He's in the other car. We have to get Kusakabe in hiding for some time."

Ahhh, that's right.

We saved Kusakabe Masaya. I, myself, wasn't too sure about the

things that happened just now. Why was Meo there? Is her hand okay? Did anyone get caught? Did everyone escape?

Kusakabe..... Did Kusakabe Masaya treat Meo--

I sank into fatigue and slow aches, it felt as though nothing matters now. My task is completed. Though it was really a win, I just felt like having a good nap at that moment.

"Oi, get a hold of yourself. You used five hundred people to deceive the yakuza. Do you understand?"

Yondaime's voice seemed fuzzy as well.

"..... I know that. Though I didn't really do anything, and I wasn't even confident that we would succeed."

I wasn't sure if it was my voice trembling, but I wasn't even sure if it's my consciousness that's fading instead.

"I never thought that it would actually succeed. People probably feel like that when they're deceived."

"..... Letting Alice hack into their system was to show our power. Because of that, those people misunderstood that we could even do something with the bank accounts. Asking Major to block the telephone signals was to ensure that our phone number wouldn't be found out. I think they probably weren't completely intimidated by me, and they might be suspicious as well. But if things were really true..... Then there's no turning back."

And then, we waited until time was almost up before we rushed in. This is to let Mikawa think 'To be safe, it's better if we bring Kusakabe Masaya to the bank'. I was betting on his 'to be safe' thought.

With the help of a large amount of people, using their misunderstanding, suspicion, self-protection-- finally, we managed to achieve our objective.

But it would've failed if Meo didn't appear.

What am I doing? Involving hundreds of people, but I only took action through other people. At the last instant, I couldn't even do anything.

I think, the person who won was Meo, not me.

A flattened Boston bag was placed below the passenger's seat. Alice said that before, we must bring the bag back to Meo, as all the answers are inside.

But this doesn't matter now.

Anyways-- so tired. I'm just thinking that I want to have a break today. Leaning my head on the seat, I closed my eyes. While listening to the sounds of the engine of the Smart, I sank into a temporary slumber.

Chapter 7

Meo was joyously picking her clothes. She changed her shirt or the ribbon tying up her hair every two minutes, and kept opening the door of the study to ask: “Mr. Assistant, what do you think about this?” Any one would do! Really.

Pole and Rocky smiled wryly, while Yondaime was sitting on the table grumpily. The manly atmosphere that filled Hirasaka-gumi was all but destroyed (But it’s already like this since Meo appeared).

A whole night passed after the incident, and it is now Saturday morning.

As I stayed up in the night and was hurt, I fainted in Yondaime’s car, they said that they couldn’t wake me even with an elbow attack, and was carried to the bed in the office. That’s why I wasn’t too sure about things that happened after that. Ahhh, it’s bad. I stayed outside for two days without telling my sister, I’ll get killed.

“Oi, any one of them would do, just hurry up and scram! Hasn’t the matter been solved already? Don’t just stay here, Kusakabe is waiting for you!”

Not hiding his impatience, Yondaime shouted at the door of the study.

“Okay! Thanks, Mr. Boss! Wait for awhile!”

What answered him was an innocent voice.

“Where is that person right now?”

“He’s at the place where a doctor I know stays. Though he’s a surgeon, there’s no other place that he can go, as the underlings from Tabara-gumi are looking for him. He’s just a bit weak right now, not too hurt.”

When I think about it, why was Yondaime so sure from the start that Kusakabe Masaya’s fingers were safe? Not only his fingers, his ears were alright as well. After confirming his safety, we noticed that he wasn’t hurt, though rather weak.

“Oh, please. You’ll figure it out after thinking for a bit.”

Yondaime rolled his eyes.

“Tabara-gumi wants to portray him as the person who defalcated the company, right? If they wanted to pretend that he committed suicide, what would Kishiwada-kai think about it if he’s lacking an ear or a finger? Obviously they’ll know that he was imprisoned and tortured. At that time, they might be asked why didn’t they hand him in right after catching him. So they must ensure Kusakabe Masaya’s body is unharmed. The ears and fingers were probably from the underlings who did something wrong.”

It’s no wonder that Yondaime said that it was a random threat. I only understood that it was only a simple thing after hearing his explanation. Though the world is usually like this, it feels as if we have to continue to greet the next morning after a lost fight.

“Did Kusakabe request to see Meo himself?”

“That’s right, and he said that he’ll pay too. But not a word of thanks. That’s why I hate the yakuza.” Yondaime seemed to be somewhat annoyed: “Remember to tell Alice to charge him appropriately. We’re not doing volunteer work.”

Oh, I see. So he wanted to see Meo.

Then— Meo indeed won.

Though this isn’t really a matter of winning or losing now.

“…… Did you guys ask Kusakabe?”

“About what?”

“Why did he ask Meo to run away with the cash?”

Why didn’t he use other methods? Even for self-protection, he should have other choices. Why did he use a method that caused himself and Meo to be unable to move, there’s no such need, right?

“Why would you want to know that, is there a need? It’ll only make Alice happy.”

“You have a point……”

“And don’t ask even though you already know the answer, you’re only similar to your owner in this matter.”

Being criticized like this, I cringed:

“Though we know about it, there’s a lot of places where we don’t really understand as well.”

To Alice, this would be the truth but not the facts.

In addition, Alice was still determined not to tell me anything about her request in my plan even after the matter ended.

Yondaime tsk-ed, and ruffled his hair.

“Look at the items that Kusakabe bought when you were monitoring the supermarket.”

“…… Eh?”

Isn’t that……

The matter that Alice was investigating. Maybe Yondaime knew about the meaning of this?

“Well…… Things like a kitchen knife, deodorant, sewing kit, lighter.”

“Isn’t there something like a pair of scissors or knives?”

How did you know? I blinked in surprise.

“Won’t you know after just looking at it? Those were the tools to cut down the fingers.”

Fingers?

“Their fingers are cut down if they did something wrong. Do you need a more detailed explanation? Though not much people would do this themselves. The scenes in movies when the palm is upwards are all lies. Actually, they must curve the fingers upwards with the palm downwards, fixate it with a kitchen knife or something then cut it down.”

Ah…… So the disposable chopsticks and bandages were for this. I unintentionally imagined the clumsy and bloody scene and felt a chill on my back— Kusakabe Masaya was alone in the dark hut, placing his little finger on the finger cutting device that was like a primary school project.

“He probably wouldn’t be able to see a doctor at that time. The cut part of the finger couldn’t heal because bones were still jammed there. So they must use scissors or a small knife to cut it short, then sew the surrounding flesh together. The air freshening spray is actually used as an anesthetic. They wouldn’t be able to feel anything for some time after spraying the whole can onto their fingers.”

My face was probably stark white when he finished saying that.

“……. Why…….. did he want to do that?”

“That’s probably why he hid near the house of the boss of Kishiwada-kai. Probably to negotiate directly with him if all his arrangements couldn’t work?”

“Ah……”

The yakuza are really a bunch of idiots, Yondaime said.

“It’s about time to prepare the car.”

Yondaime stood up, and turned his head back to say while he was about to walk out of the office:

“Kusakabe probably wants to retain the method of money laundering as well.”

The steel door closed slowly. I sighed. Since Alice refused to explain, Yondaime looked more like the detective this time……. Birds of a feather, I suppose.

This is actually a simple reason, it’s just that I’m too dumb to notice it.

Even so, the answer would probably be crossed out if it is directly written on a paper, huh? The way of expressing it is too ironic. Thinking of Kusakabe Masaya’s tragic decision so that he could protect his family, I couldn’t help but feel a chill on my back.

Hiding in the city while avoiding his pursuers, he called numerous other people too. Actually, he didn’t do that so that he could escape overseas, he was looking for a medium to send the money overseas.

He was trying to finish laundering the two hundred million that Kishiwada-kai gave him that he couldn’t finish laundering it.

I looked beside my foot. The Boston bag was just like a shell that was left over after an organism shedded it. All the answers.

“I’ve decided!”

The door of the study suddenly opened, and Meo rushed out.

It was an elegant white dress with frills on the side, daringly showing her shoulders. Though it’s only April, is the brain of this girl in summer mode all year? As it was short sleeved, the bandages around her left wrist could be clearly seen— her hand that tried to grab her father’s hand at that moment.

Meo’s hand— definitely caught it.

“Is your hand okay?”

“Eh? Ah, yeah. Though it still hurts a bit, the bones should be okay. It’s my first time doing an X-ray, it’s so fun.”

This girl’s life really seems to be quite happy.

“…… Why did you appear there?”

Telling you not to run out alone for so many times, but my requests were just useless. Meo’s face clouded over for a moment.

“Erm…… well…… Sorry. But……”

Meo glanced at Pole and Rocky standing at the entrance.

“I told them. Told them that I wanted to go. Then they brought me there.”

I turned around to look at the two. Pole and Rocky lowered their heads with their faces red. Don’t do that, it’s disgusting. Don’t they have any resistance towards women?

“Aniki, please forgive us. Sou-san scolded us because of this yesterday……” Pole joined his palms together, lowering his head to apologize to me.

I shook my head. Actually, I wasn’t about to blame them.

Because the one who won was Meo.

“Mr. Assistant, is your wound okay?”

“Mnn— ? I’m okay, don’t worry.”

I used my hand to touch my cheek covered with gauze. You really can’t say that I’m hurt like this. Compared with the prices that the others had to pay, mine is more like dust.

Compared with the burden that Kusakabe Masaya and Meo are shouldering……

“…… Meo knew it from the start?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did your father run away? Why did he tell you to hide the money? The reason he told you not to call the police?”

“I don’t really understand things that are too complicated……” Meo tilted her head. “But the building is where dad, mom and I lived. If dad is not there, the big sisters would be troubled too. That’s why I believed that he would come back.”

Being able to continue to live at Hello Palace, Meo continued to believe this until now. Believing that everything will return to its original state.

Kusakabe Masaya, himself, believed that such a miracle will occur as well.

The last words that he shouted out in that phone call— the Thai that he said only to Meo.

“Those words…… I’m not really sure what that means. He said ‘You have many mothers’. Maybe he’s talking about the big sisters in the building? Don’t worry because there’s a lot of people, does he mean that?”

The words passed through Meo, and went into Alice’s ears.

Being able to read the meaning in those words like that isn’t easy at all.

He did all that just to protect that building.

To protect the people gathered at his side from all parts of Asia— his family.

The matter that he is most scared of, is the dirty money of unknown

sources in his hands— he's afraid that the fact that the money laundering ability of Hello Palace has reached its limits would be known by Kishiwada-kai. If Kishiwada-kai knows of this, they would definitely just abandon Hello Palace. If they abandoned the money laundering too, the yakuza would probably get rid of Hello Palace that was their filter, while the people who lived there would be unable to continue living in Japan. Calling the police would have the same results.

That's why he chose to run.

The more surprising thing is, he really pretended that he defalcated the company. Since he had no way of getting near to his home, he called Meo to take away the money. Mikawa and Tabara-gumi probably felt surprised too, huh? Because they didn't even know what Kusakabe Masaya's motive was.

Which means, no that Kishiwada-kai would not realize that there are still "money that haven't been laundered", they pretended that he "did not launder the money, but took it". The only thing that he could do is to get more time. Frantically running away, struggling, praying and waiting for a miracle to occur. What an idiot, how could things return to its original state?

But Meo shook her head while smiling:

"There's no such thing. Because Dad is still alive. It's okay as long as he's still alive. There would be a day when things would return to its original state."

As long as he's alive……

Meo squatted down with her back to me and opened the zipper of the Boston bag. Using her hands to search inside. All the answers are hidden in the secret pocket in the back of the bag. I searched for it and pulled out the thing hidden inside it.

I saw this before, it's a pure white phone that was the same model as Kusakabe Masaya's. After I opened the phone, a group photo of a man and a woman at a beach somewhere appeared on the screen. The Kusakabe Masaya in the photo was probably just over thirty, while the woman beside him was the spitting image of Meo.

The answers are always the simplest. Though I don't know how Alice noticed this.

There was absolutely no need for Kusakabe Masaya to stay in touch with Meo. Because he knows of Meo's exact location anytime.

Because at Meo's side— Meo's mother is always with her.

"Mr. Assistant, what's wrong?"

Meo tried to peek from the back, but I hurriedly stuffed the phone back into the hidden pocket and zipped it up. Because Kusakabe Masaya once said that he'd give it back to her when she's older, so it's better to respect his wishes for now.

While thinking about this, he's actually by his wife's side all along as well.

Using this bag to carry the money used in money laundering each month, probably it isn't just to prevent loss or robbery, huh?

Meo and I walked out of the office in between Pole and Rocky, then took the elevator to the first floor. Gentle rays of light shone out from the scale-shaped clouds, it's just before noon on Saturday. Yondaime's Civic (how many cars does this guy have anyways?) was waiting for us on the slope in front of the building.

At the instant when she got onto the car, Meo turned over her head and said:

"That's right, Mr. Assistant. I'll tell my dad about what you said to me."

My jaw dropped. Say what?

"If that's not okay, then I'll leave it in Mr Assistant's hands. When Meo is sixteen, you're probably eighteen already, right?"

If it's not okay…… What does that mean? And what does she mean by leaving it in my hands?

"Thank you so much. A huge……. Thank you!"

Looking at the Civic 3 driving away, Pole suddenly said.

"I really have to report this to ane-san. Betraying her is really bad."

Rocky answered:

"But as you're our aniki, it's better if other people talk behind your

back.”

What are you guys talking about?

I suddenly realized that my spring break is nearing its end, the week passed in a flash.

Yesterday, I went back to Hanamaru Ramen Shop to continue my job after sending Meo away. I dragged my tired body back home. I haven’t slept at home for quite some time now. I didn’t wake up until the radiant sun shone onto my eyes from the seams between the curtains. Sleepily looking at the clock, it was already ten.

“I didn’t make your breakfast.”

Those were the cold words by my sister when I finished changing and walked down to the first floor. I could only fill my stomach with bananas and oranges, then went back to my room. I’ve passed my probation and would start working officially today, so I’ll just eat at Hanamaru as an employee then.

To me, the matter had already ended, but I would sometimes search online for news related to this.

Until yesterday, my sense of danger had already numbed. When I calmly think back about things, the things that I’ve done had already brushed past crimes. The employees in Hello Corporation saw my face too. It’s okay for me, but the violence by Hirasaka-gumi might already be complained now.

Up till now, the assault at the bank parking lot yesterday hadn’t been exposed yet, and there’s no sign that the police are investigating the matter. But indeed, I did something that Tabara-gumi would mind (about this, Yondaime told me not to be so worried of it, and nothing would happen), would I really be okay? I really feel uneasy if I can really return to the ordinary life of a normal high school student.

The bells of the school would ring at about half past ten.

Ignoring that, I continued to browse webpages meaninglessly, and then I heard footsteps walking up the stairs.

“There’s a frivolous guy called Kuwabara or something at the entrance, he said he’s here to pick you up.” My sister said. I was taken aback and sprung up from the chair. Is it Hiro?

A blue imported car was parked in front of my house.

“Your sister is so pretty, can you introduce her to me?”

The first thing that Hiro told me when he saw me was that…… This guy is really……

“Erm…… Is there anything wrong? Why didn’t you call me before you came here?”

“You might run away if I called you.”

The voice of a young girl came from behind Hiro. In shock, I straightened my back. The window of the backseat was open, and I saw a small teddy bear and lustrous black hair. Why is Alice…..?

“Just get on the car first.”

Hiro opened the car and forced me into the car, beside Alice. The dress that Alice wore was warm-colored, with a slight country style, having square lattice patterns on it and has frilly sides. She looks really like a doll in that.

“I didn’t know that you have so many clothes.”

“If possible, I would wear mourning clothes when I go out. But I can’t wear that because of our destination.”

Today’s destination?

“Don’t you have to work part time at Hanamaru Ramen Shop today

as well? Today is the last day of the spring break, so you'll only be free on today. Hiro, let's go."

"Erm…… Where are we goi—"

Hiro's car accelerated, and I was flung onto the seat, and couldn't even finish my question.

"Be careful! You'll squash the present!"

After Alice said that, I immediately noticed the box. It was a black box with Hanamaru printed on it.

"A present?"

"Master's special ice cream cake. You didn't squash it, did you?"

The box was slightly squashed, and the lid was almost open. Looking into the box, there were four cake-shaped ice cream decorated with chocolate and biscuits that were surrounded with dry ice.

"It seems okay…… What a special ice cream."

"It's an Easter egg."

Easter egg?

"It's Easter today. Don't you know that? It's to celebrate Jesus Christ's revival three days after being executed on a cross. Almost all Japanese would celebrate Christmas, but not much people know of the exact day of Easter. It might be because this day is not just a celebration, since there were sufferings first, the miracle was more valuable. Even so……"

Alice closed the lid.

"I'm a proud Japanese without any integrity. I just want to enjoy the taste of the ice cream. I don't care if it's Good Friday or Sabbath, just leave that to Kusakabe Masaya. We just need to celebrate the miracle of reunion."

The miracle of reunion?

Our conversation stopped there.

Alice gazed at the back of the driver's seat. Hiro silently steered the

steering wheel. The posh imported car felt just like a deep sea fish that was well taught, silently sliding on the road. Where are we going to? From the direction, we're not going to the station or Hanamaru Ramen Shop.

"…… Don' you have anything to ask?"

Alice asked softly.

"Would you answer me if I asked?"

"No, I probably wouldn't tell you anything."

Hiro's shoulders seemed to shake for a moment. He was laughing. As usual, Alice is a really detestable person. I already knew what she was thinking about, so I wouldn't blame her for not telling me anything at that time.

"Then can I say anything I want? These are just my sudden thoughts, but you just need to listen."

"Suit yourself."

An expressionless answer, but through the small teddy bear, Alice was still holding the sleeves of my shirt tightly.

"— I originally planned to deposit all of the two hundred million yen into Kusakabe Masaya's account, but you stopped me, right? Then we deposited part of the money into the account of the guild, while the rest, into other unknown accounts."

Alice nodded lightly.

When I told her the contents of my plan that time, the thing that Alice requested me to do was this. Which means, the donation to Kishiwada-kai wasn't the only lie that I told to Mikawa.

Actually, there was only about ten million yen in Kusakabe Masaya's account. Even though the receipts were only worth ten million yen, if only you place a large stack of receipts before them as bait, it would be enough. Alice said that at that time, and it indeed happened as she said. I think they'd probably don't have the time to check all of the receipts of the five hundred people, right?

"Though I didn't investigate this, and they're only my assumptions, all of the accounts are probably Kishiwada-kai's accounts opened

everywhere using other people's names— isn't that right?"

The side of Alice face froze slightly. From this moment on, it would be the territory that Alice wanted to protect.

"Alice, you went through money laundering as well."

I slowly said that, as though it was a sigh.

I think, that is the only answer.

Separate the dirty money from unknown sources, depositing the money using different names into a few hundred accounts, hiding the source of money and returning it to Kishiwada-kai. That is money laundering.

But why?

The reason is actually really simple. Alice was just helping Kusakabe Masaya, who stayed in the city though he was at risk, completing his task. To deal with the money that hadn't been laundered yet. So that Kishiwada-kai would not abandon Hello Palace. To protect— the home of Kusakabe Masaya, Meo, Yi Ling-san and the others.

This is already not what a detective does. As Alice have said herself. Besides—

"Isn't money laundering a crime? If you know their accounts, you would be arrested if you were exposed that you instigated other people to transfer the money. Though I'm not too sure about this, this method is probably not too good, because the chances of getting exposed is quite high. So……"

I stared at Alice's face that was like a doll:

"So that's why you didn't tell me anything, isn't that right?"

Transferring the money was Alice's own orders, I only followed her instructions. That's why I didn't do anything wrong at all. I'm not sure if it really is that great, but that was the way that Alice chose to protect me.

I closed my mouth. Actually I really feel like saying this to her…… You say that you don't have any way to save or protect anyone, those are all lies, but I couldn't say it out loud.

What's the reason? I don't know.

There was a long silence. Hiro's car avoided the road that was in a traffic jam, then drove to a wide road after passing by three traffic lights.

"— Now, do you understand the emptiness of digging out the words of the dead?"

Alice said with a hoarse voice.

I nodded. These matters are meaningless to anyone, but there's no way of expressing it besides using words. Alice kept repeating this, hurting her own soul again and again.

"So it's meaningless now, isn't that right? Meo and Kusakabe Masaya, you and I are still alive, and must continue to live on. Kishiwada-kai probably knows of the truth of the defalcation now. Even so, the burdens that Kusakabe Masaya was shouldering will not disappear; the mess that Mikawa cooked up must be handled by him and his company. Those are the rules of the yakuza. Additionally, the fact that the ability of their money laundering had reached its limits cannot be changed, and the time that it collapses can only be delayed. No matter how a detective plays his tricks, buying time, the things that had been damaged cannot be returned to its original state. Even so—"

Alice looked at the scenery outside the windows. The car drove onto the slope, and the scenery around us felt rather familiar.

"Even so, we have to continue to live on. Gather the fragments to cover up the cracks, using a broken oar to row in the water. We have to live on if we are still alive— that is the order that God gave to all living organisms, and NEETs are not excluded from this. So let's think of people who are still living. See, we're here."

People who are still living—

Eh? We're here?

The car stopped silently, it looks like a parking lot. There were countless white lines on the asphalt road, while there weren't many cars there. I went closer to the window of the car to look outside, and I could see quite a few large buildings at my left.

I know this building. The name of the hospital that was hung on the

large entrance was still fresh in my mind.

“Hurry up and get down, don’t forget the present we brought for the patient.”

Alice kept using the head of her teddy to push my head, while I opened the door and walked down unsteadily like a dolt.

“I heard that Ayaka regained consciousness yesterday.”

I only understood what Hiro meant after a long time.

Ayaka…… Regained consciousness?

“What are you spacing out there for?”

After walking down the car, Alice used the bear to push on my waist while pulling on my sleeve:

“Are you still going to say something like you don’t want to see her or something like that?”

“Eh? Ah, no……”

Thinking of people that are still alive.

Meo said this before, as long as we are still alive, it will definitely return to its original state. So that I would believe those innocent words, I’ve already went through many meaningless things. Even so…… Even so…….

Even if I don’t believe in it, miracles still mercilessly, uncaringly, unmovingly happens on any person. Even if nobody notices it, even if nobody is thankful for it.

“That’s why we need four Easter eggs. Listen, if Ayaka can’t eat the ice cream yet, I want two. Do you hear that, Narumi?”

“Mnn, I hear you.”

I nodded weakly in answer.

Hiro looked at us while smiling, then walked towards the entrance of the hospital. Alice pushed on my back. With her unreliable hands, her unreliable power.

Then—

Let’s just think about people who are still alive.

I reconfirmed the weight of the box of ice cream in my hands again, and walked towards Hiro’s silhouette.

Afterword

This year, it's the first time I reported what they call personal taxes. Since the taxes aren't much, since just one publisher published my book, the calculations are quite simple. The time for my job isn't set, and the Tax Office is only fifteen minutes from my house by bike— with such great conditions, I only made my request at the last minute- fourteenth of March- because of my laziness. I let my friends handle the calculations this time because of my laziness, but I really don't know what to do next year. I originally had more fees to report, but I lost all the receipts for my electricity bills. And I even thought: can I claim this fee or that fee as expenditure? As it's the first time that I had to take note about the concept of 'taxes', that was how the second story came to be.

…… Actually, all of them are just lies, sorry. How could a story that I thought of in March be published in June? My writing speed is already so slow, too. Though this isn't really funny, since I have four pages this time too, I'll continue to write on.

About how I thought about this story, actually it's because of my tax evasion— oh, not really. From the point of tax saving, I feel that this is actually quite important.

Let's say that I would publish a novel with music as its theme, then I bought the CDs that the songs appeared in to claim it as expenditure. When the Tax Office finds the receipt of the CD, they might just say: "You didn't just buy this because you wanted to use it as reference, but to claim the fees of the CD as expenditure, which is why you just crammed the song into the song, isn't that right" or other suspicions like that. So that the truth wouldn't be seen through and then get chased for the taxes, I must first write this in the afterword as a precaution. For instance: I thought of the structure of the story on X day X month! Then, as long as the date on the receipt is later than the date in the afterword, it could prove that I bought it for reference.

Actually an afterword is just what it seems to be, you write it afterwards; so you can't use it as evidence— please don't tell the Tax Office about this.

The story kept talking about dirty money from the start of the story, which means, this book is a story about money. If we change the

two hundred million yen into concrete objects, what would you think of? If you answer, twenty million True(?) Chocolates immediately, it feels like your age would be revealed at once; if you answer two twenty million umaibos, your background would be known as well.

When I thought about using 'the girl who rushed into the detective agency holding two hundred million yen' as the start of the story, I recalled a client that would appear occasionally at the mahjong parlor that I worked at before this. He said: "Though human lives cannot be bought with money……. But you can sell them. If you want to utterly destroy someone, the money that you can get from it would probably be twenty million yen. It would be the same even with poor people."

In reality, he was dead drunk when he said that, and his words could only be described as fragmented, so what he said was actually quite brief. According to him, two hundred million yen would be equal to the value of ten people. Since his eyes were quite scary, I dare not ask him, how do you get twenty million yen from a person? So those might just be him talking nonsense.

From that day on, I never saw him ever again. Maybe he spitted out twenty million like blowing out bubbles, sinking in the dark swamps of Shinjuku.

As for the three man mahjong that appeared in the book, it was a rule that I learnt from a mahjong parlor, but when I checked from the internet recently, I realized that it was only used at the area that I worked in. There's another variation of mahjong that was quite similar to it, my boss probably improvised it to create his own version. Not using the North Wind tile as the Flower tile, but Field Wind, it seems that this was a special rule from Hokkaido, where my boss came from.

As for why I'm writing so much about things that most readers cannot understand, it's actually because of my personal expectancy. Awaiting some readers that would perhaps share the same knowledge of mahjong as me, and so would read more when he got this book.

We might have already brushed past each other at a dark corner of the Shinjuku mahjong parlor, surviving in the swamp, but reuniting after years through the afterword of this novel— that would really be a small but precious miracle.

It might even be the him or him who disappeared after borrowing money from me. Though I said I wanted to write the afterword seriously, now it's ruined again. Please give me back my money!

We obtained the help of my responsible editor Yuasa(?)-sama and illustrator Kishida Mel-sensei and the others this time as well, and we finished this novel after giving quite some effort. I completely, definitely, absolutely did not increase the chances for Yondaime's part just because I want to see the illustrations of him, I really didn't do it. But the drafts of Yondaime and Meo that I received matched the image of them in my mind very well, it really made me so happy. As usual, please let me use this chance to express my gratitude to all of you, thank you.

April 2007 ,Hikaru Sugii

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 02

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